

The E-Files (Eternity Legion BK 2) Chapter I

by J.C. Lords

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The Eternity Legion

Book Two: The E-Files

By J.C. Lords

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**

Foreword

**

This story is a sequel to the Eternity Legion. Reading the Eternity Legion is not necessary, but it might be helpful. The events of this fanfic occur sometime after the X-Files movie.

**

Chapter One: Arrival

** **

Chicago, IL

1:03 a.m.

**

Leroy King caressed the handle of 9mm pistol tucked in the waistband of his pants like a pious man touching a holy amulet.

Somebody had dissed Leroy. Somebody had to die.

The tall black man stepped off his car, adjusting his leather jacket so the gun wasn't clearly visible. Few cops ventured into this neighborhood at this time of night, but it paid to be careful. Leroy had been arrested seventeen times in his career, but he had only served time twice, both times before he was twenty years old. None of the other charges had stuck; witnesses had a way of changing their stories -- or dying mysteriously -- when Leroy was involved. People messed with him at their peril.

Case in point: Jonas "Fatboy" Jackson, who had absconded with a substantial amount of crack cocaine. Fatboy had developed a taste for the merchandise he was supposed to sell, and Leroy was there to teach him the error of his ways.

A second car disgorged Leroy's posse. Five guys, all chosen for their guts and casual brutality; all of them murderers before age fifteen.

Leroy and his gang advanced towards Fatboy's crib, a basement apartment in a low-rent building. This was going to be a fast, simple job: kick the door down, pump Fatboy full of lead, and drive away.

Things stopped going according to plan just before they crossed the street.

A bright flash of light overhead briefly dispelled the night. Leroy had time to blink in surprise, once, twiceâ€|

A wave of hot air picked him up and slammed him against the side of the building. Leroy felt bones breaking. He screamed.

Four of his guys were screaming as well. Leroy's ears were buzzing; he could barely hear them amidst the roar of flames and the screeching of dozens of car alarms.

Bomb. Had to be a bomb. Cradling a broken arm, Leroy twisted away from the wall and looked around.

One of his guys was quiet. Dead quiet. A piece of car muffler -- Leroy was pretty sure it came from his car -- had speared him. He looked like a sausage at the end of a toothpick. The rest of the posse looked pretty banged up, but were still alive.

Across the street, Leroy's car burned merrily, at least the half he could see. Half of the car was just gone. Not just the car, either: the street and the sidewalk had been swallowed up by a large crater. Smoke and water spouts were pouring out of the hole in the ground.

Big ass bomb.

Leroy shoot his head, then bit his lips when the movement jarred his broken arm; he had broken ribs, too, the way he felt. He tried to rise to his feet. He reached out with his good hand to steady himself, and touched something hot. Leroy recoiled, winced in pain at the sudden movement, and looked down.

It was a rock. The weirdest rock he'd seen in his life.

For one, it hadn't felt like a rock. Besides being hot, it had felt like touching plastic, or wax -- soft, like. Its shape was weird too, round and regular, not like a random rock, but like something that had been made.

Or something that had been born.

A choked scream across the street made him turn his glance away from the weird rock. Somebody staggered away from the hole. Even dazed by the explosion, Leroy recognized him. It was Fatboy. The doped-up fool had rushed out to see what all the noise was about. Fatboy was moving away from the hole in the ground, clutching at his face.

"Whafuck?" Leroy said weakly. Fatboy had something on his face. The struggling man tottered blindly a few steps, and Leroy got a better look.

Some-- thing was hugging Fatboy's face. It looked like a giant spider. With a muffled scream, Fatboy took off running down the street.

"Whafuck?" Leroy repeated. Half-deafened by the blast, he did not hear the noise coming from the weird rock next to him, but a flicker of movement caught his eye.

The rock that wasn't a rock was moving. Its rounded top split open, and a foul smell hit Leroy. He tried to crawl away, despite the pain.

Something leapt towards his face. Leroy felt small clawed limbs biting into the sides of his head. He tried to scream.

Darkness.

**

Chicago Count Hospital

1:21 a.m.

**

The ambulances came howling in, delivering the casualties. The call had come in and shaken up the unusually quiet E.R. An explosion -- some said, a meteorite, of all things -- had injured a number of people. One dead, almost a dozen injured. Three cases were coming into the Chicago County Hospital, and the reports from the paramedics were not making any sense.

Dr. Mark Greene, Attending ER Physician, was waiting outside for the ambulances, ready for the worst.

"Go, go, go!" The first stretcher came rushing out of the ambulance. The paramedics lookedâ€¦ they looked scared. Dr. Greene was baffled. He had ridden shotgun on an ambulance for a while, and those guys could take almost anything in stride.

"What have we got?"

"Lacerations, broken arm, cracked ribsâ€¦ and this."

Dr. Greene's eyes widened. At first, he thought that was some weird new oxygen mask. But no -- something was covering the man's face. Something alive, its limbs wrapped around his head. "What the hell?" Mark blurted out.

> "We don't know, doc. Breathing's normal, BP is low but at safe levels. I tried to pull it off him, there." He pointed at a section below the man's jaw; blood had caked there. "This thing, it's holding on with claws, man. I almost pulled his face off, there."<p>

"You did the right thing. All right, take him to OR Three."

"We've got another one!"

John Carter, MD, had been watching the first patient with the same shocked expression. He recovered quickly enough. "I'll take him." He rushed towards the other gurney.

Mark Greene let his learned reflexes take over. Deal with the situation; don't think about it. "All right," he started as they wheeled the patient in. "We'll need x-rays, tox screen. Get some pliers sterilized. Stat!"

Nurses and orderlies stopped gawking at the scene and started working. Dr. Elizabeth Corday, the surgical consult, came into the OR. "Oh, dear Lord," she said. "What in Heavens is that?"

> Dr. Greene shook his head, as he got a good look at the thing. "Some sort of animal." Nothing he had ever seen before, he didn't add. He reached out with a forceps, grabbed one of the legs, tugged at it. He felt skin tearing beneath. "No good, we are going to have to cut it off him." He considered. "Better wait for the X-rays and the tox screen."<p>

"How is he breathing? That thing has his entire mouth and nasal passages blocked."

"I don't know, but his breathing is not obstructed," Greene replied, listening in with his stethoscope. He could hear the man breathing steadily.

He heard something else, too. A slithering sound inside the man.

"I think it's inside him," he muttered.

"What?"

> "The animal, it's got some limb or extrusion inside of him." He raised his voice. "Hurry up with those X-rays!" <p>

Dr. Carter came in. "My guy is stable, but the creature is holding on to him like a pit bull."

"Mine, too. Let's take it easy until the x-rays come back."

"It looks like some sort of marine animal," Carter commented. "We need a zoologist in here."

"Good point. I'll make a few calls," Mark agreed. "Maybe somebody from Chicago U., or the Lincoln Park Zoo." As he left, he took a last look at the thing.

Mark Greene had confronted death and horror in a myriad of form, from lethal trauma to deadly microorganisms.

His gut told him he was facing the worst one yet.

**

Washington D.C.

3:11 a.m.

**

The ringing phone brought her awake with brutal suddenness. At first, she pounded on her alarm clock before she realized what the sound meant. Resignation drove away a brief burst of anger. Agent Dana Scully, M.D., picked up the phone.

"What is it this time, Mulder?"

"Turning psychic on me, Scully?" the voice on the other end answered with its familiar subdued cheerfulness.

"Just a matter of past experiences begetting expectations, Mulder," Scully said tiredly. "Only you make it a habit of calling me at ungodly hours of the night --" she glanced at her alarm clock. Just after 3 a.m. "-- truly ungodly hours of the night. So what could not wait until tomorrow morning?"

"You aren't going to believe this, Scully," Mulder said.

"You're probably right," was the deadpan reply.

"A meteor hit Chicago less than an hour ago. Not a dinosaur killer, just a little one. Tore up a couple of cars. Over a dozen people were injured, one fatally."

"That's pretty amazing, but I take it there is more."

"The initial reports are a little confusing -- I'm getting some of it from the Lone Gunmen, butâ€¦" Scully, are you rolling your eyes?"

"Turning psychic on me, Mulder?" Scully replied in a sarcastic tone. "Go on."

"One of their friends, this guy who monitors police and emergency transmissions, he recorded some ambulances claiming they had people

attacked by strange animals. Alien animals like nothing they've seen before. Coming from the meteorite crash site."

"This all sounds extremely flimsy," Scully said, getting ready to hang up the phone.

"Wait; there is more."

"I certainly hope so."

> "I called a friend of mine at the CDC. He was pissed off about being woken up at this hour, but he did some checking for me. A team of investigators is being assembled and dispatched to Chicago, even as we speak."<p>

"For a meteorite?"

> "Many scientists hypothesize that life came to Earth from space, Scully," Mulder said in his lecture mode. "Brought in from meteor and comet impacts. It is even possible that some viral epidemics did not originate on this planet, but represent extraterrestrial biota, carried by fragments from other worlds."<p>

"I saw The Andromeda Strain, Mulder. So, on the evidence of some hour-old reports from your largely delusional friends, and a CDC investigation, you want us to fly halfway across the country. What are we going to tell Skinner?"

"You'll help me think of something."

Scully debated for a few seconds. She could hang up, go back to sleep, and pretend this phone call had never happened. Or she could get dressed, follow Mulder on this harebrained quest, and put another nail on the coffin of her career. And risk life and limb along the way, not to mention her sanity.

It was a foregone conclusion. She sighed. "Very well, Mulder. But you buy the tickets and make all the arrangements. And you let me sleep on the plane."

"Your wish is my command."

**

Chicago County Hospital

2:22 a.m.

**

"You were right," Dr. Corday said, as the ER team examined the images on the ultrasound monitor.

The creatures looked like giant scorpions. They had inserted a long protuberance down the throat of the victims, reaching deep into their bodies.

They had been monitoring the two patients very carefully. All the other injured from the explosion were normal cuts, scrapes and broken bones; treating them had been a relief, but now Greene, Corday and Carter were turning their efforts on the other two. The blood tests had come back showing elevated levels of dopamine -- a natural

chemical that inhibits nerve impulses. That was probably what was keeping the victims immobile.

Carter had suggested using an ultrasound monitor on the patients. Through it, they could see that the tentacle inside them was moving, growing. "We have to do something," Carter said. "Remove it, kill it, something."

"Let's get a blood sample from the creature. Maybe that'll help us figure out what to do," Greene suggested. "It seems to be dormant, but let's be careful." Part of him wanted to wait for the zoologist from the University to show up. He'd tracked down the local expert on exotic fauna, one Professor Harding, who, after some initial hostility from being woken up in the middle of the night, had agreed to come over and take a look. But Carter was right; they needed to at least start getting information, before deciding what to do next.

Several orderlies with heavy plastic gloves stood by, just in case the creature decided to jump. Greene approached the first patient, a hypodermic in hand.

The creature's skin was surprisingly tough. Mark grimaced. "It's like leather." With some effort pushed the needle in.

A yellowish liquid bubbled to the surface. Some of it was sucked into the hypodermic.

Which promptly started to melt.

"Look out!" Greene recoiled, dropping the syringe. Both the metal needle and the plastic tube were dissolving! The melting puddle hit the tile floor of the OR.

And ate through it.

"Holy shit!" Malik, one of the orderlies, blurted out.

Carter leaned over gingerly over the burning hole. "It's going right through to the basement!"

Dr. Corday looked at the patient. "The creature has stopped bleeding, thank God."

"All right, nobody touch them," Greene ordered. "Let's keep the patients segregated from the rest of the hospital. Malik, go to the basement, see how far the acid went. Let's see if we can collect a sample."

It all sounded reasonable, but Mark felt, deep inside, that they were like children whistling in the dark.

And the dark was full of monsters.

**

Chicago, IL

2:23 a.m.

**

A few blocks away, the night was alive with the flashing lights of police cruisers, ambulances, and fire-fighting vehicles. This alley was quiet, almost serene in its stillness.

In short, just the way Buddy Carmichael liked it. A dark place where he could crawl behind a dumpster and have a drink before falling asleep.

Buddy had spent much of his life in psychiatric institutes of some kind. Whenever budgets were cut, he and others of his ilk were released onto the streets. Buddy preferred life on the streets. He could do whatever he wanted, and when the weather was nice, he didn't mind sleeping in dark alleys. Buddy was thirty-six years old, looked sixty, and would probably not make past forty-five.

The light in the sky and the noise that followed had scared him out of his usual hiding place. Now he was at his second choice. He staggered into the alley, already well on his way to being drunk. A well-dressed couple had seen fit to give Buddy a 20-dollar bill earlier today. A twenty! Buddy was a master at getting the most bang for the buck, at least when it came to potent potables (while institutionalized, Buddy had always excelled at that particular Jeopardy category, despite stiff competition from his fellow inmates). The twenty had turned into enough cheap alcohol to keep him off his feet for a couple of days. Now all he needed was a quiet place to enjoy his liquid wealth.

Buddy stepped into the alley. He froze, looking down with the rapt tension of a deer catching the scent of a predator.

Somebody was already in the alley. A man, prone, lying face down right behind the garbage bin.

Normally, Buddy would have shrugged and staggered away. He was drunk enough to be bold, however. He approached the man lying on his spot. "Hey. Hey, you're on my bunk, man," he whispered hoarsely as he got closer.

The black man on the ground did not belong in the alley. He was fat, and looked too young and prosperous to have to sleep behind a garbage bin. That made Buddy angrier. "Hey, you," he hissed. He kicked one of the man's feet. The man did not stir.

Something clicked inside Buddy's head. "You dead, man?" If the stranger was dead, that would be too bad, but Buddy had learned the ways of the scavenger. He shook the man, and then noticed a fat wallet on the fat stranger's back pocket. Gingerly, he pulled it out, opened it. It was full of cash.

"Bingo," Buddy said breathlessly. He stuffed the money in his pocket, dropped the wallet, and turned over the man, searching for other valuables.

What he saw made Buddy recoil in horror.

Something was on the man's face. When he was a child, Buddy had been terrified by the squid in 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. That's what the thing looked like, a squid, tightly wrapped around the guy's

face. A trickle of blood was running down the man's chin.

"Oh, no good, no good at all," Buddy blabbered.

The squid-thing was throbbing. In the faint illumination provided by the streetlights, Buddy saw the man's Adam's apple bob up and down to the same rhythm. The thing was pumping something down the man's throat. Buddy gagged in disgust. He fell on his butt, then crawled crabwise away from the man. It took him two tries, but he finally got to his feet, grabbed a hold of his shopping cart, and started pushing it away from the alley.

"No good, no good can come of this," he said, and did his best to forget what he had seen.

In the alley, forgotten and forsaken, Jonas "Fatboy" Jackson lay unmoving, as the thing on his face progressed to its next life cycle.

**

Chicago County Hospital

3:01 a.m.

**

Dr. Green watched the TV news with shell-shocked weariness.

The newscaster was young, pretty, and looked only slightly frazzled despite the ungodly hour. "This is Bambi Edwards, reporting live from the scene of the first major asteroid impact on a major American city. The fires have been put out. One fatality has been reported, and half a dozen people with serious injuries have been sent of Hope and County hospitals. Meanwhile, a team from the city Department of Health has removed most of the debris from the site." She turned to a young Hispanic man loitering behind her. "Sir, did you see the impact?"

"Yeah. It was fuc **BEEP** ing amazing."

Mark turned away from the TV, missing the now flustered reporter's next words. He walked back to the observation room -- the quarantined observation room -- where the two patients had been placed. Their vitals were stable. They were both running a low-grade fever. And something else was going on.

The parasitic infestation was spreading in both patients. Ultrasound had revealed the creatures secreting a liquid into the men's body cavity. It couldn't be the acid secretion, though -- that had actually eaten through several inches of the concrete floor in the basement before finally oxidizing into harmlessness. It was as powerful as hydrochloric acid; if the victims had been exposed to it, they'd be long dead by now.

His fists clenched. He hated being helpless, not knowing what to do next.

He heard footsteps behind him, and turned. It was Carter. "Any change?" the younger doctor asked.

> "Oh, there are changes. I just don't know what any of them signify," Dr. Greene said bitterly. Nobody else did, which was small consolation. They had brought couple of specialists in, and they had walked away shaking their heads. Professor Harding had stared at the thing for a few minutes, then taken some pictures with a digital camera and asked to use an Internet terminal. He didn't look like a happy camper, though.
 "Dr. Greene?" That was Nurse Carol Hathaway, and she didn't sound like she was bringing good news. Mark and Carter turned around, and saw half a dozen unsmiling men in dark suits gathered behind Carol, who looked both harried and angry. The leader of the pack of strangers was a sickly looking man with a lit cigarette in his hand. Mark immediately realized two things: he didn't like the newcomer, and the man was trouble personified.

"Dr. Greene, I presume," the smoking man said.

"This is a no smoking area," Mark replied coldly.

"So your nurse told me." The man took another puff, blew smoke towards the ceiling. "We won't bother you for long, Dr. Greene. We are here for your two patients." He motioned with the lit cigarette towards the two men on the beds behind Mark. "We are with the CDC. This facility is not equipped to handle this situation." The smoking man turned to the silent men. "Gentlemen?" The expressionless men stepped forward.

"Wait. Just wait," Dr. Greene said, fighting to hold his temper. "We cannot release the patients without the proper paperwork. We are still trying to notify their next of kin. And I'll need to see some identification."

The smoking man's face grew even grimmer than before. "You really don't want to get in my way, Dr. Greene," he said, as matter-of-factly as someone talking about the weather. "You would not enjoy the experience, should you survive it."

"Carol, call security," Mark said. One of the men stepped aside, neatly blocking her in. Mark's heart skipped a beat.

"Well ahead of you," Carol said without turning around. "They're on their way."

> She wasn't bluffing. Several security guards arrived moments later. Ahead of them, moving just as fast as the guards despite her disability, Carrie Weaver led the way. The tough-as-nails doctor had not been fully briefed yet, but she was fiercely territorial. "What is going on in here?" she said.<p>

"This is a matter of national security, doctor," the smoking man said.

"They are trying to take away our patients," Mark explained. "I still haven't seen any ID."

The smoking man dropped his cigarette and ground it out with the sole of his shoe. He turned to one of his lackeys. "Deal with it," he said, ignoring Dr. Weaver. The other man stepped forward, brandishing an official-looking card and badge. Weaver stepped forward to examine them.

Mark Greene looked at the smoking man as he calmly lit another

cigarette. The look in the man's eyes was not at all friendly. For some reason, Mark almost felt as if the stranger and the creatures tormenting his two patients shared some grotesque kinship. Neither of them seemed concerned about the fate of the two victims, for one.

**

Midwest Airlines Flight 772, en route to Chicago O'Hare Airport

3:22 a.m.

**

"Well Scully, we just gained an hour," Mulder said, resetting his watch.

"You promised to let me sleep," Scully said grumpily.

"Sorry."

Scully turned her back on him.

> Mulder shrugged. He was too hyped up to sleep. He picked up the phone on the seat in front of him and dialed the number the Lone Gunmen had given him, mentally commanding himself to speak quietly.
<p>

The phone rang six times before somebody picked up. "This is the Monitor," a voice â€" a young male voice, trying to sound deeper than normal â€" spoke up.

"This is agent Mulder."

> "Mulder? No shit? Cool!" the Monitor all but squeaked. "I mean," he added, trying to deepen his voice again, "I've been expecting your call."
<p>

"No shit? Cool," Mulder replied, trying to keep the mocking tone in his voice down to a dull roar. "So, any more news to report?"

> "A shitload. We have, uh, one dead, about twelve injured, seven of them pretty badly. The news media just confirmed it was a meteorite. And then there was something an ambulance driver started shouting over the radio. Some of the victims had something over their faces."

 "Something like what?"

> "Like an animal," the Monitor said solemnly. "Like an animal they'd never seen before."
<p>

"Interesting," Mulder commented. "Did he say where he was taking the victims?"

> "Chicago County Hospital."
<p>

"I guess we'll be paying a visit there as soon as we arrive." He looked at his watch. "We should be in O'Hare soon." He hoped it would be soon enough.

**

Chicago, IL

3:43 a.m.

**

Buddy Carmichael's night got even weirder.

After his panicky flight from his regular alley, Buddy managed to calm down. He had money. He had booze. He quite literally forgot all about the man with the squid head. He started looking for another quiet alley where he could hunker down for the night.

Walking the streets at this hour wasn't safe, even for those with little to lose. Buddy knew that. When car lights flashed down the street, he looked down and picked up the pace. He was very close to his third choice, a good place near a hot air vent. If he could just make itâ€|

The car picked up speed. Buddy tried to ignore it. Cops, maybe, hassling him.

"There's one!" an eager voice called out.

There were cops, and then there were worse things.

A gang of punks had been beating up homeless people for fun and exercise. Buddy wasn't playing with a full deck most of the time, but he remembered that much. He turned his head, and saw that the car had stopped and half a dozen guys were pouring out of it.

"No good," Buddy moaned. He managed to run halfway into an alley before one of the punks tripped him with a baseball bat. The fall was painful, but Buddy knew worse was to come.

The gang surrounded him. From his prone position, Buddy saw work boots, bicycle boots, even a pair of Nikes.

> "All right! It's hammer time!" one of the punks shouted.<p>

A light flashed at the end of the alley. The would-be bashers paused in surprise.

Five newcomers were now sharing the alley with Buddy and his tormentors. They were far away enough that Buddy could see them from the ground.

There were three women, a man, and a boy; everyone, except the boy, was wearing business suits and carrying a suitcase. They comprised the weirdest group Buddy had ever set eyes on in his (rather eventful, although never more than now) life.

Leading the way was the man. Tall â€" a giant of a man, his heavily-muscled build clearly visible even under the business suit he was wearing. Dark-haired and expressionless, wearing dark glasses despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, he looked like trouble. He didn't say a word.

Standing next to him was a dark-haired woman, strikingly attractive, clad in a blazer and miniskirt that showed a lot of leg. It wasn't her athletic and graceful good looks that impressed Buddy, though; she looked dangerous. She regarded the scene in the alley with a feral grin in her face. "You boys are not what we're looking for," she announced. "But I can use the entertainment."

A second woman, with light brown hair, was standing protectively next to the boy, a bratty-looking kid in baggy jeans and sneakers, carrying a backpack, who didn't seem worried by the six thugs in the alley. "You guys are so busted!" he told the punks. "If I were you, I'd put down your sticks, and then I'd walk away quietly out of here."

"Let's take it easy, John," the older woman said. She looked tough, but less eager for trouble than her companion.

The last woman -- or girl, she looked fairly young -- was short and wore her dark hair short. Her large, dark eyes looked sad, worried and determined at the same time.

The six punks had been looking forward to short and brutal beating, and helping themselves to any valuables their victim might be carrying. They could have just as easily fled -- the strangers were not blocking the alley's exit -- but their blood was up. Their leader, a tall guy who (when he wasn't beating up homeless people) played varsity football at Chicago University, charged the newcomers, his baseball bat at the ready. The rest of them followed.

Buddy sat up, just in time to watch the fight. It wasn't much of a fight, really.

The man and the woman up front did most of the work. The big man stepped forward and caught a descending baseball bat with his bare hand. There was a loud twap sound when the bat connected. The man's free hand lashed out, and the punk was slapped across the entire width of the alley, smashing hard against a wall. He slid limply to the ground.

Another one swung a crowbar and hit the big man on the side. The man didn't even stagger, but the crowbar rebounded out of the punk's numb hands. The attacker felt as if he had hit a brick wall. "What the fuck are you made of?" he gasped before a backhand sent him flying to the other side of the alley, spitting teeth along the way.

The woman didn't wait for the attack. She rushed forward, grabbed two of the thugs by their shirts, and pulled them off their feet. She shoved, and both of them were tossed over Buddy's head, landing in a heap near the mouth of the alley.

The last two went for the rest of the group, perhaps thinking them easier prey.

The woman protecting the boy -- her son, perhaps? -- rushed one of the attackers. A baseball bat swung towards her. She ducked under it and delivered a brutal uppercut right into the man's groin. The would-be attacker folded with a whimper. The second man was met by the short woman. She took a blow to her head that should have cracked her skull. Instead of dropping, however, she decked the surprised attacker with a palm strike to the jaw.

In a handful of seconds, it was over. The six punks were lying on the ground, half-conscious at best, all nursing assorted bruises and a few broken bones. The feral woman looked down at her dress. "Ruined a stocking," she said. "20th century fashions aren't very sturdy."

"You're lucky," the kid said. "Arnold always had to steal clothes when he was sent out." The kid then turned to Buddy. "Are you all right, dude?"

Buddy cringed. The kid pulled out something that looked like a pocket calculator. "Advanced liver and nerve damage," he said, looking at the readout. "You really shouldn't be walking around like this." Before Buddy could react, the kid pulled out a gun -- no, something that looked like a gun, and pressed it against the side of his neck. Buddy felt a cold infusion, running down his veins from the point of contact. "There, that ought to do it," the stranger said, satisfied.

The big man spoke for the first time. "All hostiles have been neutralized," he said in an emotionless voice.

"We must go."

"All done," the kid said. The bizarre group walked out of the alley. They got into punks' car, and drove off.

Buddy went through the pockets of the unconscious thugs and collected a few hundred extra bucks. For some strange reason, however, he wasn't looking forward to turning the cash into liquor. He felt younger, better, more sane than he had in years.

He walked out of the alley, a whole universe of possibilities unfolding before him.

**

Chicago, IL

Same Time, Same Place

**

The short fight below was a colorful display of infrared signatures -- the reds and yellows of living flesh, standing out against the darker and duller hues of cold stone and asphalt. He had watched the brief encounter with the utmost interest.

This was something new. New experiences, new challenges -- those were what he and his kind lived for.

The biological signature of one of them -- the larger female -- was unmistakable.

She was a hybrid.

Her presence here could not be a coincidence. Somehow, this group had learned of his project. The energy outburst that had preceded their arrival was unfamiliar. His kind did not value technology as highly as other things -- honor and the hunt being first and foremost -- but something this unique would be extremely valuable; loot to go with the trophies.

To his chagrin, he realized he would have to call for help. He had come here to start a game preserve -- insert a few seedlings, watch

them multiply, maybe take a few trophies, both native and newly-born, and then return home. These new arrivals might jeopardize the project. It did not pay to be overconfident. Not too long ago, a distant relative of his had died on a hunting run on this very world.

So be it. He would call in a whole Pack. There would be no lack of volunteers after he described the situation.

The strangers drove off. His decision made, the Predator ran invisibly across the rooftop from which he had observed the fight, and gracefully leapt over to the next building, heading towards his ship.

**

Chicago County Hospital

4:15 a.m.

**

"Step aside, Mark," Dr. Weaver said unhappily.

Mark Greene wavered for a second.

"Mark, just do it."

Mark realized the minions of the smoking man were seconds away from using force. There was nothing he could do. Word had come from upstairs: cooperate with the government team, and forgo the usual paperwork in turning over the patients. Carter and Corday were very angry, but when Mark stepped aside, they followed his lead. The G-men transferred the two patients to stretchers and wheeled them out. The smoking man turned to the doctors. "Discussing tonight's events would be most unwise," he said, in the off-hand tone of someone commenting on the weather. "Both for your careers, and your well being."

"There is no need for threats," Weaver replied.

"I do not make threats," the smoking man replied. "I merely predict outcomes." He turned to his assistants. "Let's go. We've wasted enough time."

Mark watched his patients being taken away with impotent rage. He shook his head. ER doctors have to learn to lose battles. Few learn to like losing them, however.

"Back to work," he said. Carter started to say something, then shook his head and walked away. Corday put a reassuring hand on Mark's shoulder. "You did everything you could," she said. Mark nodded, gently disengaged himself from her, and walked to the bathroom. He washed his face, stared at the mirror for a few minutes, despite the dread memories of the place -- he had been beaten to within an inch of his life in this restroom. Another time where he had been helpless, unable to do anything.

When he emerged, he saw three newcomers -- two women and a large man -- standing by the front desk. The new receptionist looked bewildered. Mark approached.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he said, trying to keep the edge off his voice. He wasn't feeling very helpful just about now.

A woman with light hair turned toward him. "My name is Sarah Connor. We need to see some patient of yours."

The other woman looked around; she sniffed the air delicately, an intent expression in her face. "They were here," she announced. "But they are gone."

"Damn!" Sarah said. "Where did they take them?"

The strangers had to be talking about the strange patients. It was the only thing that fit. "Look, before I say anything," Mark said. "I need to know who you are, and what your connection with the patients is."

"We work for a private organization," Sarah Connor said, somewhat hesitantly. "It is very important we see those patients."

"You might be looking for the same patients we are, then," a man said behind them. Mark turned. A man and a woman in business suits had walked up to the front desk. They were flashing badges.

"Agents Mulder and Scully, FBI."

Mark took a deep breath. "All I can tell you -- all of you -- is that those patients are no longer in our care. Government agents took them not ten minutes away." Which was more than he would have told them, under normal circumstances, but these weren't normal circumstances by any means.

"Mulder?" Sarah Connor said. "Fox Mulder?"

The male agent nodded, looking slightly puzzled. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet. But we were told to contact you."

"By whom?" the female FBI agent asked.

"Long story," the dark-haired woman said before Sarah could reply. "Maybe we could talk somewhere else."

Mulder nodded. "That might be a good idea." He turned to Mark and handed him a card. "I would still like to speak with you. This is my card. Please don't hesitate to call me."

Something about Agent Mulder's demeanor defused Mark's anger. Unlike the previous bunch of government goons, this man seemed to genuinely want to help. Mark took the card. "I will."

The five strangers walked out of the hospital, leaving Mark Greene more confused than ever.

But amidst the confusion there was a glimmer of hope.

**

Duncanville Hotel, Chicago

4:20 a.m.

**

The Duncanville Hotel was a cheap, discreet establishment, with a daily and hourly rate, frequented mostly by ladies of the evening and their clients, traveling businessmen with tiny expense accounts, and people with something to hide. The occupants of rooms 312 and 313 belonged to the third type. At the moment, only two of the five occupants were there, hunched over a laptop computer on a table. The TV set was on; an old Western movie was unfolding on the screen, as the reluctant hero steeled himself to confront the men in the black hats. The boy and the young woman inside ignored the show, intent on their work.

John Connor, truant, amateur thief, would-be Messiah for a whole world, and most recently, Eternity Agent, sat back and relaxed for a moment. "All right," he told his companion. "The search virus is in the system. It will piggyback on any normal Internet or Intranet traffic, and will search every government database it can reach. It'll take a while, though."

"Not bad," his companion replied. She was a very cute pale woman with short dark hair. Her name was Annalee Call. She was an android from the future -- a future, anyway; the world had many possible futures.

That was fine with John. He liked cybernetic beings. His best friend was one, as a matter of fact.

"Not bad at all," he said. It always paid to hype yourself, especially when you were trying to impress a pretty android. "It's good to be hacking into good old 20th century tech again."

"Let's hope we get the information we need on time," Call said, looking serious again. That was Annalee's biggest problem -- she was a living bummer.

"We will," John said confidently. That was the other thing chicks liked -- confidence. "We're Eternity Agents. We're the best at what we do."

Annalee smiled a little. Not bad, John thought.

Words flashed on the computer's screen. "It's Arnold, sending us an instant message," John said. His buddy Arnold, better known as Terminator, was out with his mom and Annalee's friend Ellen Ripley.

SITUATION STABLE.

MADE CONTACT WITH SUBJECTS MULDER AND SCULLY.

INITIATING RECRUITMENT PROTOCOLS.

STAND BY.

BE COOL DUDE.

John snickered at the last line. "He's getting a little better." Arnold was trying to learn how to be more human-like. He still talked -- and sent e-mail -- as if he had to pay by the word, though.

"They must have run into the recruits at the hospital," Call commented. "I wonder if that was planned, or just luck."

"Who cares? The important thing is, everything is going according to plan." He looked at Call appraisingly. "You look tense. Do you want a backrub?"

Call smiled. "I don't need a backrub. And I think you are a little young to be making a pass at me."

John shrugged. "Can't blame a guy for trying, can you?" As a matter of fact, a part of him was relieved to be turned down.

"I think you're a sweet kid, John. In a few years, we can see -- I won't be getting any older, after all." Her smile acquired a slightly mischievous edge, and John's heart did a flip-flop. "Although you might consider dating someone your own species."

"Hey, I'm open-minded. Besides, I can really only date people from the Legion. They all are older than me. Buffy is too pushy, Gabrielle and Willow are too nice, Ezri is already seeing someone -- Besides, I like you the best."

"Maybe you won't have to wait very long," Call said. She raised a hand before John could reply. "But not now. We have a really important mission to do," she continued, getting all serious again. Sometimes, Call could be as zero-fun as his mother. "Unless we succeed, every human being on this planet will be dead in less than a year."

**

Abandoned Train Station, Chicago Environs

4:33 a.m.

**

The small caravan of cars arrived at the old train station minutes before the train did. The six bodies, each with a creature attached, were carried to the metal train car where medical teams awaited.

The smoking man watched the process quietly for a few moments. When the last two patients were wheeled into the train, he pulled out a cell phone and dialed a rarely used but never forgotten number.

"It's me," he said into the phone. "We have gathered all the subjects. It's nothing we have ever seen before." A pause, as the person on the other side spoke. "No, these are new. You know what this means. We must convene a meeting soonest." Another pause followed. "Yes, I will present any findings myself. We will keep a team in Chicago to make sure we didn't miss anything."

The train, now fully loaded with the six infected victims, started to roll away. The smoking man watched it go, his impassive demeanor masking the turmoil in his mind. He and the organization he represented were breaking a decades-old covenant by not destroying the infected bodies. The current situation, however, demanded extreme measures.

Very soon -- months at the outside -- the Colonization process would begin. Unless a new answer could be found, submissive cooperation would be the only option. This incident offered a new hope.

His cell phone started ringing. He answered it, listened without speaking for several minutes. "Observe them. If they -- Mulder especially -- get too close to the truth, terminate them with extreme prejudice. We can brook no interference, not now." He hung up.

It would be too bad if Fox Mulder had to die. The smoking man had fought against that eventuality for quite some time. This was not the time for half measures, however.

The fate of the human race was at stake.

**_

To be continuedâ€¦

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2. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> The E-Files-Chap2

Author's Note:

Sorry for the delay between chapters -- Real Life â„¢ got in the wayâ€¦ Keep the reviews coming (positive, or critical; let me know how you feel); they are what keeps me writing (every work of fiction is a desperate cry for attention, after all grin).

Legal Disclaimers: See Chapter One

Chapter Two

Brian's 24-Hour Diner, Chicago

4:34 a.m.

It was beginning to get light out. Fox Mulder knew he could use a shower and a shave. Come to think of it, he could have used a couple more hours of sleep, too. Scully, who had at least managed to sleep on the plane, still looked none too happy to be there, sitting in a cheap diner's booth across the three strangers. Mulder could sympathize. He had taken her to meetings with all kinds of nuts, fanatics, or self-deluded fools.

These three didn't look the part, however.

The woman with the light hair started talking after a tired-looking waitress took their orders. "Introductions first. My name is Sarah Connor."

"Ellen Ripley," the other woman said.

"And this is, ah, Arnold," Sarah added, indicating the tall man. Built like a football player, he was, and he had a well-concealed shoulder holster under his business jacket. Mulder had noticed it when they were sitting down at the table.

"At the hospital, you mentioned you had been told to contact us," Scully said.

"Yes. We didn't expect you to be at the hospital, but we would have called you this morning anyway."

"And this is related to the meteor strike last night?" Mulder said.

"It was not meteor," Ripley said coldly. "It was a vessel."

Scully spoke up. "Let me guess. An alien craft from outer space."

"Correct," Arnold said. His voice sounded totally devoid of emotion. "An insertion vehicle."

"Or a disease vector," Ripley added.

Mulder didn't have to look to tell that Scully was rolling her eyes. "You realize that these claims are pretty extraordinary," he said. Might as well do the skeptic bit at first. "We are going to need some proof."

Arnold set one of his hands on the table and reached for a knife. Sarah put a hand on his shoulder. "Not that. Not here." She turned back to Mulder. "All right. See that salt shaker, next table over?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Now, if agent Scully can keep her eyes on the shaker, and agent

Mulder can look at me, I can set up a little demonstration. It won't be very dramatic, butâ€¦" Sarah clenched her left hand. She had a small silver ring on her index finger, she pointed it at the salt shaker.

Mulder head glass breaking.

"The shaker just shattered," Scully reported. She turned around as the waitress rushed over. "How did you do that? Sonic device?"

"This ring projects kinetic energy over short distances," Sarah explained. "Its impact power is a function of the strength of the wearer."

"That is amazing," Scully commented. "But a weapon, however advanced, is not direct proof of a spaceship."

"It proves that we are not just lunatics," Sarah said tartly. "A paranoid may blab about spaceships and ray-guns, but now I just showed you my ray gun."

"Good point," Mulder said, trying to break the tension. Sarah and Scully were glaring at each other -- it seemed the chemistry between those two wasn't positive. He turned to Ripley. "You said the vessel was also a disease vector. What did you mean by that?"

"It was a plague ship," Ripley said darkly. "It carried alien bioforms. The patients have been infected with them."

"Some reports at the scene spoke of some victims with animals attached to their faces," Mulder said. "Is that what you're talking about?"

Ripley nodded. Her expression was deadly serious. Mulder started to suspect she was intimately familiar with this situation -- former victim, perhaps?

The waitress came over with everyone's order. Arnold drank water; everyone else ate quietly for several minutes, mulling things over.

"We need your help, agent Mulder," Sarah said. "The government is hiding all the evidence of the crash, and all the infected victims. We have some people looking into it, but you have access to sources beyond our own. We have reasons to believe that the alien infestation may cause the death of millions of people."

Mulder looked at Scully. "We are going to look into this. Perhaps you can get in touch with us later today."

Sarah nodded. "We will call you."

"I didn't give you my phone number."

Sarah smiled. "I know. We already have it." The trio rose up. Sarah paid the bill, and left a generous tip. "I did a brief stint as a waitress," she explained. "It's not an easy job."

> And then they left, leaving Mulder and Scully to ponder their words.<p>

Chicago County Hospital

6:05 a.m.

One more hour to go in the shift. Mark Greene hoped it would pass without any more surprises.

He did his rounds. Most of the injuries from the meteor strike had been treated and either released or sent up to surgery or intensive care. In the light of the new day, the events of the previous night seemed unthinkable.

There was the small hole in the OR, though. Believable or not, an animal whose secretions could eat through ceramic and concrete had been here.

Trying not to think about it, Mark made his last rounds. He passed an examination room where a large black man was being attended to by Nurse Hathaway. He was a walk-in; according to his story, he had been at the scene of the meteor, and found himself lying on a nearby alley. Carol Hathaway looked skeptical; the man -- a Mr. Jackson, if Mark remembered correctly -- was a known drug user. This could easily be a ploy to get some free meds.

Mark moved over to the next examination room, where a woman with a twisted ankle was about to be released.

"Mark?" That was Carol, an uncertain tone in her voice. Mark hurried over.

Mr. Jackson was convulsing on the examination table.

"His BP is fluctuating wildly!" Carol shouted, trying to hold down the man. Mark rushed to help her. "Massive convulsions and -- " a flailing limb knocked her down.

"Malik!" Mark shouted. The orderly arrived as Carol started to rise from the floor. Mr. Jackson was clutching at his chest. He started to scream hoarsely.

Mark pulled down the hospital gown. "Chest is pale and distended! It's --"

The center of the man's chest started to darken. It swelled upwards.

"What the..?"

It burst open. Blood droplets sprayed over Mark's face, making him recoil. A thing, all teeth and fury, emerged from the gory cavity, tearing open Mr. Jackson's flesh and skin like some gruesome chrysalis. Mark and Malik both stepped back in horror; Malik backed into Carol; they both tripped and fell down.

"Oh, my God!"

The creature leaped from the bloody ruin that had been a living man but moments ago. With the speed of a cat, it darted down the hallway. Mark heard screams and the clatter of broken implements as the monster ran through the ER, leaving behind a trail of chaos and

shock.

Mark turned to Mr. Jackson. The monitors were all showing flat lines. The creature had shredded most of one lung and part of another, and shattered the man's rib cage on its way out. The man's heart had been chewed through. Nobody could survive such massive trauma.

"Call security," he told Carol, who was gaping at the corpse. "We have to catch it." He ran the way the creature had gone, asking people what they had seen. After a few minutes, one thing was clear. The creature had not left the hospital. It had ran up the stairs to the second floor.

It was somewhere inside the building.

Holiday Inn, Chicago

6:11 a.m.

A shower and a shave had done wonders for Mulder. He stepped out of his hotel room and knocked on Scully's door.

"Come in."

Scully was also looking fresher. She had her laptop on, and the modem plugged in.

"Doing some research?"

"I ran Sarah Connor's name through the computer. I got a match. With a criminal record?"

Mulder's eyebrows rose. "Yes?"

> "Possession of drug paraphernalia at age 18. It was a misdemeanor, but her picture is in the files. It looks like her," she continued, turning the screen so Mulder could see the mug shot. "Worked as waitress while going to college, 1982-1983. Married Matthew McCallister in 1983, mother of two children, named Matthew and Sarah -- very original -- andâ€| well, according to the records, she died in a traffic accident in 1991."<p>

"Our Sarah doesn't look like the kind who raises two kids and lives happily in suburbia," Mulder said.

"There are no records on an Ellen Ripley that match the one we met. And 'Arnold' is not a lot of information to go on."

"Well, the name is not familiar, but I remember the face. I was thinking about him, and it finally clicked," Mulder said. "Can you do a check on a Major Alan Schaeffer? He's Army or Delta Force, if I remember correctly."

"All rightâ€|" Scully's fingers tapped the keyboard. "I've got it. It's Colonel Alan Schaeffer now; Special Operations Group, five Purple Heartsâ€| here's his pictureâ€|" The photo of man in a jungle operations uniform appeared on the screen. He was smiling, and looked tough and determined.

He also looked just like 'Arnold.'

"There is one problem, though," Scully said.

"I think I know what the problem is," Mulder replied. "Colonel Schaeffer is in his fifties."

"He turned fifty-one last April. The man we met looked fifteen or twenty years younger than that."

"I thought so. I remembered the name and the face from an X-File from 1987. An incident in Central America. There were rumors than an extraterrestrial vessel and its pilot were destroyed by a Special Forces unit, operating illegally in the region. Major Schaeffer was the only survivor."

"And now he looks like he hasn't aged a bit since then, goes by the name of Arnold, and is still hunting aliens," Scully finished sarcastically.

"Not the strangest thing we have encountered," Mulder replied. "Although, thinking about the two people in question, another theory comes to mind."

"And that would be..?"

"Here we have two people -- two sets of two people -- identical to each other, but who have apparently led different lives. In the case of this Sarah Connor, we have one person who is dead after living a normal existence, and one who looks like she's lived a very eventful life, and who is alive. And then we have this Major Schaeffer, a young one, and an old one. Are you familiar with the "many worlds" theory, Scully?"

"The quantum mechanics concept that posits many parallel universes, theoretically one for every possible outcome of every possible event?"

"Exactly. Unless we are talking about time travel, I would guess that both Sarah Connor and our alleged Major Schaffer come from an alternate reality."

Scully blinked. "Even for you, Mulder, that's a stretch."

"It's only a guess," Mulder admitted. "We don't have enough information yet. Tomorrow morning, we should visit Dr. Greene and try to learn more."

Mulder's cell phone started ringing. He answered it. "Dr. Greene? We were just talking about you." There was a pause. Mulder's face turned deadly serious. "We'll be right there."

"What's wrong?"

"Dr. Greene thinks they have another case of infestation. Except this one has caused a fatality."

Duncanville Hotel, Chicago

6:15 a.m.

Ellen Ripley sat back on the hotel chair and tried to relax. It

wasn't easy: much of her life had been spent in a state of horror and dread -- in her darker moods, she imagined that, should she ever lead a peaceful life, she would miss the sense of impending doom that always seemed to hang above her like a shadow.

Annalee Call gave her a tentative smile. Having friends helped a lot, but Ripley doubted she would ever come to believe, deep inside her soul, that she could ever relax, or feel safe.

Which suited her for this job just fine.

Across the hotel room, Sarah Connor's eyes met hers. Ripley read concern in her expression, and shrugged with a small grin. Sarah understood Ripley better than anyone else. She knew what it meant to have one's life hanging by a thread, to have a relentless pursuer after her. They had both been through the fire, and survived.

Both of them knew in their bones that death waited behind every corner.

"So far, we have six confirmed cases of infection," Call said, continuing the briefing. "Two at Chicago County Hospital, and four at Chicago Hope. All have been removed by a government agency claiming to be with the CDC."

"And they are full of it," John piped in. "The CDC team arrived two hours ago, and they're being given the mushroom treatment -- you know, keep 'em in the dark and feed them horseshit."

"Typical," Ripley commented. Somebody would try to exploit the aliens. Governments, corporations, or the military, they were all the same. The aliens would fascinate them, entice them, and eventually kill them. Kill them and everyone on Earth.

"Any luck finding where they are taking them?" Sarah asked.

"They are not using any official channels, as far as we can tell," Call replied. "We are monitoring civilian and military facilities, looking for any signs of unusual activity, but that's going to take some time."

"We don't have a lot of time," Ripley said coldly. "The aliens will hatch anywhere from four to twelve hours after infection. We have to assume that at least one of them has already hatched." She paused for a moment. A "hatching" meant the death of some innocent person, as the alien clawed its way out of the victim's body. "After that, they will grow to full size in another four to eight hours. One of the six is a Queen. She will start laying eggs within twenty-four hours. If the bastards in charge provide her with host bodies -- we could be talking about dozens -- hundreds -- in a week or less."

"We'll find 'em," John said confidently. "Right, Arnold?"

"Correct," the cyborg said. Ripley considered the killing machine sharing the room with them. How could Sarah stand working alongside a thing identical to the time-traveling monster that had destroyed her life? On the other hand, how could Ripley stand to look at herself in the mirror, when she had been transformed into a half-human, half-alien hybrid? We become what we fight, she told herself. Was winning worth that price?

You did what you had to. Or you didn't and you died. Sometimes, the answer was that simple.

Lost in thought, she missed the concerned look John Connor gave to his laptop screen. "Uh, guys?" he said. "I just got a transcript from Fox Mulder's telephone. He got a call from Chicago County Hospital. Sounds like a chest-bursting just happened over there."

"Now it's seven aliens," Call said.

"Not for long," Ripley replied grimly.

Chicago County Hospital

6:30 a.m.

The creature had left a blood trail down a corridor, and then had broken into an air vent. It could be anywhere by now.

Mark Greene had discussed evacuating the whole hospital with Dr. Weaver. For the time being, they had called in extra security and were searching for the thing. They had been joined by the zoologist, Professor Harding, who had been in the hospital blissfully consulting with some colleagues over the Internet, unaware of what had been happening for the last few hours. "I am quite sure we have found an entirely new animal species," he told Mark as the two checked a supply closet, armed with improvised nets. "From what you've told me, it acts in a manner similar to some species of wasp -- it paralyzes its victim and plants an egg, or maybe an embryo, inside; the egg then devours the host and emerges from it."

Mark nodded, trying to remain clinically detached. "Something like that. How about the acidic blood?" The blood sample had evaporated before a container that could hold it had been found.

Harrison frowned. "That remains a mystery. Irritating secretions are not unknown -- jellyfish are an example -- but the damage you showed me is extraordinary. I cannot think of any known species with anything like that."

Mark had been thinking about that. The incidents and the meteor crash were clearly linked. A possible explanation suggested itself, but it sounded too fantastic and outlandish for his taste.

Nurse Hathaway walked up to the pair. "The FBI agents are back," she announced. Mark had called them as an act of desperation -- he didn't want to have the smoking man and his goons to come back, and he needed help.

"Very well," he replied. "Let's go meet them."

They left the supply closet, ignorant of the slumbering, growing thing hiding behind a thin partition wall.

Chicago County Hospital

6:35 a.m.

Dr. John Carter had a few free minutes between patients. He took his

breaks on the improvised basketball court by the ambulance entrance, shooting hoops. It was something of a tradition among the ER doctors.

His shift would have been over by now, but he had volunteered for a second one. Like Dr. Greene, Carter felt angry and frustrated; working might help where brooding at home would not.

Nobody around the hospital wanted to say what was in everyone's mind. It was too crazy to verbalize.

Fact: a meteor hits Chicago.

Fact: something nobody has ever seen, an animal that defies all classification attempts, attacks several people in the vicinity of the meteor impact.

Fact: government goons show up shortly thereafter, and whisk the victims away using strong-arm tactics out of the wildest militia fantasies.

Carter missed his shot, caught the ball on the rebound. "Aliens," he said. "It's got to be extraterrestrials." Saying it out loud didn't help.

Something heavy landed behind him with a loud thump.

Carter whirled around, clutching the basketball as if it was a weapon.

There was nobody there.

He thought he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, thought he heard an almost subliminal humming sound. He turned, and still saw nothing. Carter's heart was racing; he felt as if he was a kid who was awakened from a deep sleep by a noise underneath his bed.

Nothing was there.

Something was there.

The fire escape stairs on the side of the building rattled, making Carter jump. But there was nothing there.

The wind. It had to be the wind. Carter looked around once again, forced himself to relax. He might have halfway convinced himself to believe in aliens, but he sure as hell wasn't going to start believing in ghosts, too.

Above and behind the young doctor, the Predator continued his climb up the side of the building. He had called for reinforcements, but he was free to act on his own until they arrived.

His quarry was inside.

The hunt was about to begin.

> <meta name="Generator"> The E-Files Chapter 3

The E-Files

By J.C. Lords

Chapter Three

Disclaimers: See Chapter One.

Author's Note: Okay, another chapter, and hopefully Chapter Four will follow soon. More reviews will, of course, motivate me into writing faster grin

Fort Bragg, NC

7:23 a.m.

Old soldiers never die; they just get screwed over by their governments.

Colonel Alan Schaffer had given two thirds of his life to the Army. Most of his service record was classified, as were over half of his twenty-seven decorations, including nine of his twelve Purple Hearts. And as his reward he had been parked behind a desk for the better part of the last decade. Schaffer would have resigned -- had come close to doing so a number of times -- but he had no life outside the service. He had seen too much, done too much, to fit in the civilian world. So he had endured, helping train others to do what he wanted to do himself, painfully aware that he would never rise above his present rank, and with little to look forward except retirement and spending the rest of his life dying by inches.

Until now. Something new and unexpected awaited him at the other side of the door.

Alan Schaffer paused for a moment to look at his reflection on a nearby window. His dress uniform was in impeccable condition, although he felt far more comfortable in field fatigues. At fifty-one, he was still in amazing physical condition, able to keep up with the young Green Berets he commanded -- although he admitted to himself that it became harder to keep up with them each year, and he hurt a lot more afterwards. Despite his age, he was still a true warrior, proven in a hundred battlefields. He entered the office to meet his fate.

General MacGee, commander of the Special Operations Group, was inside. Sitting opposite the general was a sickly-looking man, a cigarette in his hand. Schaffer's eyes narrowed in recognition. The smoking man had been part of the debriefing team after the Predator incident. He had spoken very little at the time, and had been the only civilian involved, but his power and influence had been obvious.

"Reporting as ordered, sir," Schaffer said, standing to attention.

"At ease, Colonel," the general replied. "This gentleman is going to borrow my office for a few minutes and talk to you." The general got

up and walked out of his office. He paused at the door. "Oh, Schaffer -- I counted my cigars before I left. I don't want to come back to any MIAs."

Schaffer smiled. "Don't worry, sir. I brought my own." Since the anonymous civilian was smoking himself, Schaffer proceeded to light one of his cigars as his commanding officer left.

"We meet again, Colonel," the smoking man said.

"And I still don't know your name," Schaffer replied. The mysterious man had some serious pull, he knew, to chase off the Special Operations Group commander out of his own office. That little scene had been played out to make a point: the cigarette smoking man had the power to make or break military careers.

"My name is not important," the stranger continued. "What is important is one simple fact: I can offer you a new position, one that may require your special skills."

Schaffer felt a cold feeling at the pit of his stomach. "They are back."

"Not quite, but the situation is rather similar. We have captured a number of -- outside elements, shall we say? We need someone to set up the perimeter security. Both to prevent break-ins as well as break-outs. Someone with experience in dealing with enemies who may be beyond the norm."

So that was it, Schaffer realized. Another covert mission where he would be deceived, and probably killed. He reflected on this for a moment, puffing on his cigar. The doctor had told him he was shaving years off his life with the damn things, but Schaffer could no more quit smoking than he could refuse this mission. Except this time he would keep his eyes open, and be ready for treachery.

"When do I start?"

The two men smiled at each other, for altogether different reasons.

Chicago County Hospital

7:30 a.m.

Scully stepped away from the operating table. The autopsy had provided few answers, and spawned many more questions.

"Any luck, Scully?" Mulder said, walking into the autopsy room. Scully and Dr. Weaver had conducted the post-mortem on Mr. Jackson, the unfortunate victim of the unknown bio-organism.

"The cause of death was relatively straightforward," Scully reported. "Massive trauma to the torso area. Almost every major organ was shredded by the organism. Of course, I know of any animal that could do it as quickly or as thoroughly. A rat can chew its way out of a human body, but it will take quite a long time." She took off her bloodied surgical gloves. "How about on your end?"

"The creature is nowhere to be found. Our new friends are looking for

it, with the help of the hospital staff."

Scully frowned. "Mulder, those -- people are not public officials of any sort. Is it a good idea to have them wandering around the hospital?"

"Good question," Dr. Weaver said angrily. "I thought they were FBI agents like you two."

"Right now, they are civilian consultants assisting the FBI on this investigation," Mulder replied, casually hammering another nail in their career's coffin. Scully blinked, but said nothing; getting into an argument in front of the officious Dr. Weaver would do no good.

"So the Bureau is assuming responsibility for their actions, then," Dr. Weaver pressed on.

"Yes, doctor," Mulder replied confidently.

Before he could finish talking, an orderly came running in. "Dr. Weaver! We have a situation up here!"

The doctor and the two FBI agents rushed upstairs.

"We've got it," John Connor said triumphantly, looking down at the tricorder. He and Call were sitting in a rental van while the rest of the team searched the hospital. "It's on the third floor, Mom."

"We're moving in," Sarah Connor replied through their intercomm system.

"That little monster is so dead now," John said.

"Don't be too overconfident," Call replied. "You've never dealt with these things. I have."

"But it's a baby!" John protested. "It's what, a few hours old?"

"Even newly hatched, it can be dangerous. Smart, too."

"Arnold is going to Terminate its ass, and that's that," John asserted confidently.

Shots and explosions shattered the relative quiet a few moments later.

"Uh-oh."

Something was wrong.

Things were going as well as could be expected. They had the alien cornered in a utility closet, all witnesses had been scared away, and the Eternity Agents were ready to move in for the kill. And yet,

Ripley felt a dread, ominous premonition of danger.

She shook her head, and checked her weapon. For a hatchling, the .454 Cassull Magnum revolver, firing high-velocity hollow-point bullets, should be more than enough. She and Arnold were armed with the heavy handguns; Sarah Connor was backing them up with a slightly less impressive Colt .45. Ripley wished they had been allowed to carry phasers, or plasma rifles -- at the very least, a flame-thrower -- but the Powers That Be had ruled that they would create too much of a temporal anomaly.

The tricorders that they had been allowed to bring to this world were making things easy enough, however. John Connor had been able to triangulate the position of the alien. A quick rush, a few shots, and it would be over.

And still that feeling endured. Ripley paused and looked around one last time --

-- and saw three red laser dots appear on the back of Arnold's head, clearly an aiming point for some weapon.

"Look out!" she shouted even as she knocked down the Terminator. He was stronger than her -- slightly -- but she had momentum on her side. As they fell to the ground, a small energy sphere, moving slow enough to be seen, flashed past the spot Arnold had been occupying and hit the wall.

The resultant explosion was marginally less powerful than a hand grenade. The three agents were peppered with pieces of plaster and brick. A hole the size of a dinner plate appeared in the wall at the point of impact.

Ripley did not let the explosion or the flash of light distract her. Her glance followed the trajectory of the energy discharge, right to a window at the end of the hallway. A shattered, but empty window.

Her eyes narrowed. No, something was outside, a faint outline that blurred the view outside the window. She leveled the gun towards it.

It shot first.

The weapon was shoulder-mounted. Ripley's hybrid reflexes were barely fast enough to roll out of the way of the discharge, which shattered the floor right besides her. The explosion almost deafened her. The flurry of shots from Sarah's .45 registered as muted pops. "Damn! He dodged away!" Sarah cursed.

The T-100 rushed past his companions like a relentless locomotive. He too had seen the "invisible" stranger, had seen it duck to the left, away from the window, as Sarah Connor fired at it. The Terminator's battle computer quickly estimated the location of the target even as it analyzed both interior and exterior walls and produced a plan of attack, all in a matter of microseconds.

Barely slowing down, the Terminator smashed through a door, and then burst through the exterior wall. As expected, the target was there, standing on a ledge and pressed against the now-shattered wall.

Terminator and Predator grappled with each other as they fell three stories down.

"What is going on?" Dr. Weaver shouted. They had been able to hear the second explosion as they reached the main floor. The building lights blinked and the building shuddered slightly. Before anybody could answer Weaver's question, she and everybody in the emergency room waiting room saw a figure fall and hit the top of an ambulance in a shower of masonry.

Scully and Mulder rushed outside, guns drawn. They arrived in time to witness an epic duel.

The camouflage screen had ceased to function after crashing onto the ambulance. The Terminator finally saw what he was fighting.

The humanoid was larger than Arnold, its face covered by a helmet and facemask. The shoulder weapon swiveled towards the Terminator. Moving with robotic speed, Arnold tore the weapon off its mountings. His own gun had been lost in the fall -- this would be resolved through hand to hand combat. The two inhuman warriors strained against each other for a moment. To the Predator, the struggle was a shock. Humans made good prey, but they were pathetically weak. Not this one, however. Arnold twisted in the Predator's grip, freed one of his hands, and drove it into the hunter's midsection, a savage blow that would have ripped through the torso of a normal human. It was enough to knock the Predator off the ambulance.

The alien hunter landed in a roll, however, and was on its feet before the Terminator's follow-up leap could reach it. Scully and Mulder had no time to take aim before the two combatants made contact again.

Predator threw Arnold to the ground and jumped on top of him. The alien punished the android with a brutal flurry of punches. Arnold replied with a head-butt that knocked off the Predator's face plate.

"Oh my God," Scully whispered. Mulder was struck speechless. The face behind the mask was unmistakably inhuman, a fanged mouth that resembled no Earthly animal. Green fluorescent blood flowed from a wound to the side of its face. The challenging roar that broke from the double-hinged mouth was a sound no man could ever make.

The Predator broke free from the Terminator's grasp. Two long blades sprung from a forearm sheath, and before anyone could do anything, it drove them into Arnold's lower torso, a disemboweling thrust.

"No!" Scully shouted. She fired. Mulder followed suit a moment later.

The Predator staggered to its feet. Wherever the 9mm bullets punched through its body armor -- most shots pinged harmlessly off it -- more of the glowing green blood flowed. The wounds were not immediately fatal, however. As long as it lived, the Predator would kill. It leaped towards the FBI agents. A clawed hand slapped Scully aside, a glancing blow that sent her spinning away. The other hand closed around Mulder's throat like a metal vise. The FBI agent was lifted of

his feet and brought face to face with the Predator. Its breath smelled of old carrion and fresh ammonia; Mulder gagged involuntarily despite the unbearable pressure around his windpipe.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the bladed forearm rush towards him. He closed his eyes and tensed in anticipation of the final agony.

Something wet and foul splashed on his face. A loud gun report sounded a moment later. The grip around his neck relaxed, and Mulder fell to his knees, gasping for breath. He looked up.

The Predator was swaying on his feet. The top of its skull had been blown clear off. Mulder was covered in noxious green goo. Finally realizing it was dead, the creature fell to the ground.

"Mulder!" Scully was back on her feet, a bruise already beginning to darken over half of her face. Mulder steadied her and looked up toward the third floor. Ellen Ripley was leaning out a window, lowering the smoking revolver.

"Nice shot," Mulder commented. He turned to Scully, who was shakily staring at the huge corpse. "Well, Scully -- do you feel up to an alien autopsy?"

Low Earth Orbit

8:03 a.m., Eastern Time

The craft made its final approach undetected by billions of dollars' worth of spy and defensive satellites, including some very sophisticated -- and very secret -- designs. The inside of the craft was gloomy by human standards, its atmosphere much too hot for comfort. Its insides were decorated by trophies from a thousand worlds. A Japanese Katana hung next to a Kzin fighting claw, both overshadowing a Promethean phase gun placed below them. The mounted heads of beings from a dozen planets were arrayed in a gruesome display.

The six occupants of the ship had been responsible for those kills. Their leader was selected in accordance to a rigid method of score-keeping, measured in the potential lethality of the prey, and the risks incurred in taking the trophy. Because of this, the leader had prevailed, even when some had questioned the wisdom of sending a lone hunter in the seeding mission. And now, the Hunt Leader bore the responsibility for the death of one of their own.

The six Predators roared in outrage, a deafening din that shuddered through the ship, making some of the trophies sway in its wake. Mixed with the rage -- and even some sorrow, for they cared for each other in their way -- was a great deal of anticipation. The prey was proving to be particularly dangerous. It would be a glorious hunt.

4. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> E-Files Chapt 4 **

The Eternity Legion, Book Two: The E-Files

**

By J.C. Lords

****Author's Note:**** Thanks for your comments and e-mails. As you can see, I'm posting a bit faster now. The next chapter should be rather longer, as we approach the climax of this storyâ€|

Disclaimers: See Chapter One.

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Chapter Four

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Chicago County Hospital

7:40 a.m.

Mulder knelt by the large corpse; Scully stood behind him. Here they were, face to face with a genuine alien. Not the slight elfin Greys of UFO lore, but something far larger and brutal. Neither agent knew quite what to say.

A few feet away, Arnold sat up, his midsection soaked in blood. John Connor reached him at a run. "You okay, man?"

"I'm 97% operational. The damage was largely cosmetic," Arnold reported.

Something in the dead body started making a strange chirping noise. The sound was coming at regular intervals. "I don't like this," Mulder said. He gingerly searched the corpse. An object on its wrist was making the noise. The FBI agent fumbled with it, and the cover of the square device flipped open, revealing a digital display of some sort, with symbols that were shifting in time with the sound. "I think this is a countdown," Mulder said. He and Scully started waving people away. "It's a bomb! Everybody move away from here!"

Arnold stared at the inhuman corpse, his cybernetic senses scanning it thoroughly. "I am sensing an energetic buildup," he announced. "The resulting detonation will have a force equivalent to 9.76 thousand pounds of TNT."

"Thousand?" Mulder said incredulously. "That's going to take out a whole city block!"

"Holy shit," John said. "We've got to stop it." His eyes widened. "The rings! Arnold, give me your ring."

The Terminator complied, and John took off his own ring. "They generate a force field," he explained to the FBI agents. "They might stop the explosion." He thought about it. "You should move people away, anyway, just in case."

"We're on it," Mulder said. He and Scully rushed into the hospital.

"Everybody down! A bomb is going to explode! Find some cover!" And pray, Scully thought. If a ten-thousand pound bomb did go off in the parking lot, almost everybody in the building would die, cover or no cover.

John slipped the rings over the fingers of the dead Predator. The thin metal bands automatically adjusted their size to fit onto the huge clawed fingers. "Hope that's enough."

> "Force of the explosion will be reduced to 2 percent of initial projection," Arnold reported.<p>

"Two percent? That's what, 20 pounds of TNT?"

Instead of responding, Arnold picked John up, took two bounding steps, and leaped halfway across the parking lot, landing behind a parked car.

An instant later, the Predator exploded, unleashing an expanding fireball that engulfed two nearby ambulances and set them on fire. One of them exploded as well, adding its fuel tank to the conflagration.

The glass doors of the ER were shattered into a hailstorm of slashing fragments. Fortunately, most people had heeded the FBI agents, and were behind cover. There were no fatalities; the worst case was a patient who stood up to "see what was going on" and lost an ear when a spinning pane of glass flew past his head like a runaway propeller blade. Smoke filled the ER for several moments.

Mulder shook assorted debris off him, and stood up. He had landed on top of Scully moments before the explosion. She accepted his proffered hand and he helped her to her feet. People were screaming all over the place, but they sounded faint after the roar of the explosion.

"Are you all right?" he shouted.

She nodded.

Somebody put a hand on Mulder's shoulder. He turned and saw Sarah Connor; Ellen Ripley was behind her. "We have to get out of here," she said. "Are you coming with us?"

It was really, really bad form for an FBI agent to leave a crime scene, let alone the site of what could be described as a terrorist attack. On the other hand, Mulder needed answers, and he was positive he wouldn't find any by staying at the hospital. "Yes, we're coming with you."

Surprisingly enough, Scully didn't protest.

Chicago Loop, Chicago

8:05 a.m.

The van plodded through morning commuter traffic, loaded with five transdimensional travelers, two FBI agents, and assorted weapons and gadgets.

"What about the little alien?" John asked. It was the first time

anybody had spoken since they had jumped into the van and driven off.

> "I shot it," Sarah said. "I got it while Arnold and Ripley were dealing with the big one." She gestured towards the canvas-covered body.<p>

It was funny. Mulder had come face to face with a chimera he had chased for most of his adult life, and yet he felt nowhere near as elated as he thought he would be. A young woman Ripley had introduced as Call was driving, Ripley at her side. The rest of them were sitting inside the van, on two benches set up on the sides. Besides its passengers, the van was loaded with weapons and ammo, enough to start a small war. Mulder felt some obligation to comment on that, but he decided to wait for a better time. Too many things were happening too fast.

Scully was looking dazedly at Arnold. Shortly after getting in the van, she had tried to tend to the big man's wounds. "It's not necessary," Arnold had replied, seemingly in no pain despite the blood soaking his lower torso. Scully had insisted, examined the wound -- and seen the mechanical skeleton beneath the torn flesh.

"Arnold is a cyborg," John Connor had explained proudly, as if he had built Arnold himself -- and for all Mulder knew, maybe he had. "Half flesh, half machine, although it's more like 20% flesh, 80% machine."

"Organic material accounts for 24.73% of my body mass," Arnold had amplified. "All my essential components are mechanical, however."

Scully hadn't said much since then.

Even Mulder, a lot more open to the strange and unexpected than his pragmatic partner, had needed some time to mull things over. He felt ready to start talking now, though.

"So where are we going?" he asked.

"Away from the hospital, first of all," Sarah Connor replied. "That place is going to be crawling with cops for a long time."

"And then?"

"Actually, we were hoping you could help us with that."

"I think we might help you," Mulder said. "But we're going to need some straight answers from you."

"It's going to sound pretty unbelievable," Sarah warned him.

"If my guesses are on the money, you're probably right," Mulder pressed on. "You people are not from this world, are you? Or this timeline, to be more accurate. In this -- continuum, I guess, Sarah Connor died in a car accident some years ago. And Arnold looks exactly like an older Special Forces soldier."

Sarah nodded grimly. "I checked on my counterpart when we first arrived here. I don't know why I did it. Maybe to see what kind of

life she hadâ€¦ " She smiled sadly. "At least, she seems to have been happy. Although I wouldn't have believed it -- me, marrying Matt." Sarah reminisced. Before the Terminator had entered her life, she had been a lot more carefree and happy. Matt wasn't the brightest guy, but he had been sweet, even though he was seeing her roommate at the time. Maybe something could have happened between them, in another world, another life. The smile vanished. In her own world, the Terminator had murdered Matt while trying to kill her. She turned back towards Mulder. "So, you are right, yes. A very good guess on your part, by the way, but we were told you two were good."

"And what do you want here?" Scully asked suddenly. She seemed to have recovered from her initial shock.

"We're the Eternity Legion," John Connor retorted. "And we're here to save the world."

Sarah grimaced and put an affectionate hand on her son's shoulder. "Well, that's the short, corny version," she explained. "But it is largely true."

"Care to elaborate?" Mulder said.

"Theâ€¦ Legion -- yeah, I'm not too crazy about the comic-book name -- is the creation of humans from the far future. The real far future; we're talking millions of years from now. At some point in time, the universe has two possible ends. One is endless entropy, the destruction of all matter, and all life. The other is the unification of all sentient life, working to preserve the universe; it's about as close to Heaven as one can get in this life, supposedly. There is a rival faction that wishes to bring entropy into being, however. A war is being fought in the distant future, and all the timelines of all possible universes will be involved." Sarah paused for a moment, letting it sink in. "Humanity plays a big role in the conflict. Every timeline in which humanity is wiped out weakens the anti-entropy faction. The Legion travels cross-time, to critical timelines -- nexus points that will spawn thousands, perhaps millions of timelines -- and works to prevent the end of humanity there."

"So, in effect," Mulder replied, "you are here because humanity is in danger of being destroyed."

Sarah nodded. "According to our briefing, there are two major threats. You have dealt with one of them before -- the alien colonization effort. The other one is this new infestation. I'm not sure what role this third group of aliens plays in this situation, but I suspect they may have been responsible for the infestation in the first place."

"That's some story," Scully commented.

"It's the truth," Sarah said firmly.

Scully looked at Mulder, then nodded. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I believe her, Mulder."

"I always knew I could make a believer out of you," Mulder said. "If it's any consolation, I wouldn't have believed it without all the evidence." He pointed at the corpse, and then the blood-soaked but very much functional Arnold. He turned back to Sarah. "We will help

you."

Unnamed Facility, Montana

2:30 p.m.

The signs on the razorwire-tipped fences surrounding the perimeter only said PRIVATE PROPERTY: NO TRESPASSERS. Should anybody make it past the automated gate, they would eventually come through a second fenced perimeter. This second fence was electrified, and had watch towers on every corner, manned by armed soldiers. The wooded area between the two fences was constantly patrolled by soldiers and attack dogs. The 200 people working at the facility rarely left it; those who did were flown out by helicopter to Missoula or Bozeman. The nearest neighbors were seventy miles away; the surrounding lands had been purchased, and the ring of seemingly normal farms around the facility were actually the first line of defense against intruders.

It might not be enough, given the stakes of the game. Which was why the smoking man had brought an outsider to oversee security. It was a calculated risk, but a necessary one.

While Colonel Schaeffer was given the tour of the exterior of the facility, the smoking man entered the main building, a one-story nondescript structure which could have easily contained offices, manufacturing facilities, or laboratories. It had some offices, but most of the rooms were empty. The walls were unusually thick, too -- the building could easily double as a bunker in an emergency. And the upper level was the tip of the iceberg; the real work was being conducted underground, fifty feet below the surface.

Several checkpoints and an elevator trip later, the smoking man met with several scientists. Nobody shook hands; they got right down to business.

"So what do you have to report?"

"The organisms have hatched," the lead researcher said. "Their growth rate is remarkable. Two men were injured when we moved to isolate them in individual cells. There is some question as to the suitability of the containment facilities."

"Start preparing countermeasures immediately," the smoking man ordered.

"We have. We are developing a neutralizing foam to deal with their acidic secretions -- they are quite capable to burn through concrete and steel, otherwise. Dissecting the creatures is going to be a chore; fortunately, we have laser cutters available."

"Very well. Are we ready for the first test?" Underneath the impassive facade, the smoking man was nearly trembling with anticipation. This test would reveal whether this was just merely another oddity that needed to be covered up, or something profoundly important.

"We were just waiting for you. Follow me."

The monitoring station had a dozen screens, each monitoring a

containment unit. Alien beings, their movements oddly sinuous, occupied six of the cells.

"We've selected this one," the scientist explained, pointing to a screen. "A warrior-drone, like four of the others. The largest one appears to be a female." He spoke into a microphone. "Proceed."

Above the alien's head, a small faucet opened up. A stream of black liquid ran down the wall and pooled on the floor. The alien looked at it with mild interest. It opened its double-mandibles and hissed when the black liquid started flowing towards it, seemingly of its own volition.

Black oil. The vector of alien infestation. So far, most vaccines and antidotes against its effects had met with only partial success.

The viscous liquid surrounded the alien. It ran into every cavity -- in a few seconds, all the oil had disappeared within the creature's body. For nearly a minute, the alien stood quivering.

Then, with a mighty heave, it vomited. A jet of steaming fluid shot out of its mouth, a black-and-yellow ooze that pitted the floor and the walls, burning for several seconds. The alien resumed its movements as if nothing had happened.

"It killed the oil," the scientist said breathlessly. "Well, er, it appears to have rejected it."

"Yes," the smoking man all but purred. "This might be just what we were looking for."

Chicago County Hospital

3:00 p.m.

"What's that?"

The man in the biohazard suit didn't answer right. Instead, he reached out with a metal forceps and picked up the lifeless multi-legged creature. With careful movements, he placed it in a large canister. The movements were so smooth, nobody would have realized he had a prosthetic hand. "All clear," he finally said. "This is what we came for."

The rest of the team -- all wearing the sealed suits, all fit and young, with military crewcuts -- made way for their leader. Alex Krycek walked past them, down the stairs to the mostly-empty ER.

The hospital had been shut down. All patients had been evacuated while teams of agents from the FBI and the CDC examined the site of the explosion. Krycek's team had methodically cleaned up any evidence of paranormal activity. Their ID identified them as CDC officials. In reality, they worked for no U.S. agency. They were part of the Consortium, the Syndicate -- the power brokers who had betrayed humankind in order to save their own skins.

Krycek remained cool and collected, but he beneath the calm façade boiled a sea of emotions. According to his superior, the Project's

conclusion " and the choices it would force the Consortium to make " was close at hand. This cover-up was vital. Nobody could be allowed to interfere. Even Fox Mulder, who in the past had been spared, would not be suffered to get in the way. And Mulder had been here. The story his team had managed to get out of the local witnesses was jumbled and confused, but it seemed that one more exo-form had been here, that Mulder and some unknown associates had killed it, and that a so far unknown person had detonated a bomb in the hospital parking lot. The exo-form's bullet-riddled body had been found, which was the important thing, however. Finding Mulder was secondary, for now.

Krycek and his team jumped in an unmarked van and drove off, carrying the alien's body with them.

Or what they thought was the alien's body.

Their briefing hadn't been precise enough. They had not been fully informed of the two stages of growth of the alien exo-forms. In all fairness, even Sarah Connor, who had been fully informed about aliens, had thought she was shooting the alien in question. In a way, she had " the alien had been in the process of shedding its first shape, and becoming something else. The bullets had hit the outer shell, without doing significant injury to the alien.

In the darkness of the hospital, the alien lurked. It was growing very fast now, already larger than a normal human. Soon, it would need to feed.

5. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> The E-Files Chap 5 (Mod) **

The Eternity Legion, Book Two: The E-Files

**

By J.C. Lords

Author's Note: One more chapter to go, and this baby will be finished. Thanks again for all your comments. I should have the last one done before the end of the year.

Disclaimers: See Chapter One.

**

Chapter Five

**

Unnamed Facility, Montana

9:12 p.m., Day Four

Colonel Alan Schaeffer had been in his new position for three days now, more than long enough to realize he was in over his head.

At first, he had been too involved in doing his job to notice. He had spoken with the security team of the base — all ex-military, two thirds of them American, the others an assortment of European and South American mercenaries. They were tough and well-trained, but they and their facilities were not up to the mission. One look at the things they were supposed to keep in was enough; the reports that a Predator had been sighted in Chicago, and that more might be on their way here, made it doubly important that the base was secured.

At least, his employers didn't seem to have any budget constraints. When he presented the smoking man with a shopping list that included Claymore mines, the best night-vision equipment in the market, high-powered Barrett sniper rifles, and motion detectors, the only reaction had been a cursory nod. A day later, the equipment had arrived to the base. Now, the gap between the two fences as a no-man's land of mines, sniper positions, and concealed traps, designed to catch both enemies trying to infiltrate the area and prisoners attempting to escape.

Schaffer hadn't expected the prisoners to include innocent humans, however.

They had started arriving a day ago, helicopters laden with shuffling men and women. They were wearing clean jumpsuits, but they had the worn and haggard appearance of homeless people, drug addicts, alcoholics. They had been herded inside, and Schaeffer's questions about them had been met with stony silence. Something was going to happen to those people, something unpleasant, and Schaeffer was now an accomplice. And he realized now that he was as much a prisoner here as those people.

Colonel Schaeffer lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, and he started planning to escape from the armed base he had helped set up.

The project manager had doctorates in half a dozen fields from as many top-notch universities around the world. He had come close to winning the Nobel Prize twice in his career, a near-miss that had left him bitterly disappointed. His work for the government could have earned him any number of Nobel Prizes, but he would never be able to publish any of it. For that matter, his use of human subjects for lethal experiments would probably not go over well with the scientific community. No matter. The stakes were far higher than prestige. It was, quite literally, a matter of life and death for the whole planet.

Telling himself that last part helped him sleep at night.

So far, fifteen subjects had been infected with alien organism. Their deaths had been gruesome; after the first few "hatchings," the scientist had stopped watching them. It was truly regrettable, but necessary. And he was making progress.

The aliens' physiology was the epitome of natural selection. It was incredibly resistant to all forms of infection, including the dreaded black oil that the other alien species used to propagate itself. Isolating antibodies from the monsters' highly corrosive blood had

not been easy, but he and his team had managed to do so in record time. All the research the conspiracy had done to help spread the black oil now served them well in devising a countermeasure.

At last, they had found a perfect antidote.

The researcher sat back, alone in his office. It was over. He had run two computer simulations long after everybody else had gone to bed, to confirm the findings. The gene-engineered virus carrier would infect humans and then subtly rewrite their DNA, just enough to make them produce the antibody to the black oil. The new virus would be spread through bees and corn at first, as per the original black oil plan. Later, it would be introduced in a hundred different ways. It would cost billions of dollars, but at the end of the process, 99% of humankind would be immune to infestation.

The sound of a door opening startled the scientist. He turned around and saw "cancer man" -- a nickname nobody used whenever he was around -- not holding a cigarette for a change, standing silently in the office.

"I didn't think you were here tonight," the scientist said. "But you might as well be the first to know. We have succeeded."

"I know," cancer-man replied. "And you're right. I'm not here tonight." He stepped towards the scientist, hands outstretched.

"Whatâ€¦" the scientist's question was choked out by a strangling grip as Cancer Man grabbed him by the neck. His attacker twisted his head around, and there was a sickening snapping sound.

Cancer-man's face and body shifted form as he lowered the lifeless body onto the ground. He became larger, with an impassive, merciless face. He still looked human, a useful façade for his activities.

The alien bounty hunter stepped over the corpse as he planned how best to destroy all the dead man had accomplished.

This assignment was special. This was the first time he had done work in this planet under a different employer, one whose identity was somewhat mysterious. The bounty hunter's travels had covered dozens of worlds, and his knowledge of galactic society was vast. For example, he knew that the Predators were responsible for seeding this world with the Clawed Plague, the egg-laying monsters being now bred in this facility. His erstwhile employers, the Colonists, would have paid well to destroy this project. Unfortunately for them, he was not working for them now.

No, his new employers -- a species he did not know, although their communication systems were advanced, and their wealth was quite impressive -- wanted him to release the Clawed Plague unto this planet, much as the Predators had originally intended. The Colonists might be forced to give up the planet, especially if the Predators advanced forth a claim to make it into a hunting preserve. The Colonists would be quite angry, their Rebel enemies only less so, since humankind, no matter who won the conflict, would be wiped out. In fact, the bounty hunter suspected that his new employers were primarily concerned with the eradication of the human race. That

puzzled him a little. Humankind was somewhat special -- technological species were extremely rare in the galaxy -- but, in the galactic scheme of things, nothing but a minor race, barely able to crawl up to the lower reaches of their planet's gravity well and to toss small trinkets some minor distances beyond that. Their knowledge of the true laws of physics was pitifully incomplete, their survival skills questionable. The Colonists were slated to wipe humans out. The Clawed Plague would do it more quickly and with more finality. In either case, the bounty hunter's current shape would be discarded altogether, as there would be no more humans to emulate.

A few minutes on the computers told him what he needed to know. Then, assuming the shape of the scientist he had murdered, he walked out of the office.

Merril's Motel, Indiana

9:30 p.m.

"We got 'em," John Connor said triumphantly.

The satellite photo -- courtesy of the Lone Gunmen via the Internet -- on his laptop screen showed a fenced compound, heavily guarded. After a week of legwork, false leads and a couple of narrow escapes, they had found the facility where the aliens were held. Agents Mulder and Scully had been invaluable in helping them narrow down their search. Now the team members were gathered in a cramped motel room, poring over their findings.

"We're just ten minutes away from it," John continued.

"The facility is heavily guarded," Mulder observed. "It's going to take an army to get in there."

"I think we'll manage," Sarah Connor replied.

"Their problem is not keeping people out," Ripley added. "It's keeping the aliens in. I'm surprised they have managed for this long."

"It won't last," Call said. "All it takes is one mistake. The aliens have managed to escape from facilities at much higher technology levels."

"So what exactly do you propose to do?" Scully asked.

"We need to infiltrate the facility and terminate the alien organisms," the Terminator said. "Team One will provide a diversion. Team Two will force an entry and use explosives to destroy the organisms in their containment facilities. Human casualties should be non-existent, barring alien action."

"The appearance of the new group of aliens -- the 'hunter types' -- has lowered the chance of creating a non-congruent energy signature," Call said. "This gives us more leeway to use advanced technology weapons."

"What she is trying to say is that since the fugly aliens had ray-guns, now we get to use ray-guns, too," John translated. Call gave him a mock glare, not very effective since she was half

smiling.

"Like I was saying, we can now use these." Call pulled out several plastic devices that looked a little bit like remote controls. "They are phaser guns. We can use the Stun setting, and up to Six lethal setting, with little risk of increasing our temporal signature."

"What happens if your temporal signature gets too high?" Mulder asked.

"Like we told you before, there is a war going on in the very far future," Sarah explained. "The Enemy is less capable than us when it comes to leaping from timeline to timeline. They can detect energy releases that don't match the normal ambiance of the timeline -- a nuclear explosion in 1890, for example, or electrical power during the Middle Ages. When they do, they move in and attack in force."

"Have you ever had to deal with such an attack."

"No. The Adversaries have powers that can only be described as godlike. They could cause the sun to go nova by an act of will. If one of them comes calling, then one of our patrons will move in to intercept."

"If such a confrontation occurs," the Terminator added. "The odds that the Earth will survive are less than 1%."

"Are you sure that those ray-guns are necessary? Sounds like it's not worth the risk."

"We should be safe enough," Ripley said. "And we need all the help we can get dealing with aliens. You haven't fought them before. I have. My ideal way of dealing with them would be saturation bombing with thermonuclear weapons."

Mulder's eyes widened a little. "You don't go for half measures, I see."

"Half measures will get you killed."

Call put a hand on Ripley's shoulder. Ripley briefly squeeze the hand, then turned back to Mulder. "I'm sorry. I've just seen to many people die because they underestimated the aliens."

"It's okay."

He was about to say something more reassuring when the lights went out.

"Sniper three ready."

"Weapons free," Krycek whispered into his headset radio. The kill team was in place, twelve highly trained assassins. They had the motel surrounded. _End game, Mulder_, Krycek thought. It had been a long and convoluted road, but it would go not further. Mulder and his newfound friends were too much of a threat. Termination with extreme

prejudice was the only solution. Krycek was acting as the command and control officer from an unmarked van. Five snipers were in position, and an assault team was ready move in with sub-machineguns. The murders would be make the news as the work of a militia group, striking at two Federal agents. The patsies had been selected, the news stories carefully prepared. Now all that was needed to finish this stage-play was to perform the actual killing.

"Kill the lights."

The power went out in the motel. The snipers' high power rifles were equipped with thermal sights that allowed them to see through the thin walls of the motel as if they weren't there. They had targets assigned.

"Go, go, go!" Krycek barked into the radio. He glanced into the rearview mirror.

And, in its reflection, he saw a triangle of laser dots on his head.

A trained killer, Krycek had superb reflexes. He threw himself down. A ball of light buzzed right through the space he had just vacated, crisping the hair on the back of his head. The energy blast blasted a dinner-plate-sized hole on the side of the van.

As Krycek rolled out of the van, he heard one of the snipers scream in agony over the radio and then fall abruptly silent. An explosion roared to his left, and he glanced up just in time to see the tree where another sniper had been perched flare up in flames. Burning pieces of the sniper fell off it.

His team had been ambushed. But who..?

Krycek reached into the van and pulled a set of IR goggles. He put them on and scanned the night. One of his snipers was shooting at something big. A blast of energy temporarily blinded Krycek; when the light returned to normal, the sniper was clearly dead, his body beginning to cool down. The size of the killer left no doubt. It was an E-3 alien, a Predator type. Krycek had been briefed on them; he knew enough to know that he and his men were likely all dead.

The assault team was running in all directions, shooting blindly. One of them was on the ground, neatly beheaded by a spinning blade that had come flying out of nowhere.

Krycek hugged the ground, held his gun tightly, and prayed to a God he didn't believe in for a miracle he didn't expect.

When the lights went out, the Eternity agents sprang into action like Olympic runners hearing a starter pistol. Call knocked down Mulder; Sarah did the same for Scully as the Terminator stood up and offered himself up as a target. Only one shot came into the room, and missed. Outside the motel room, pandemonium erupted, gunfire, screams of rage and terror and energy discharges all mixed into a discordant rendition of Hell.

It looked as if the attackers were having a falling out with each

other.

Unaffected by the chaos, the Terminator reached into his valise. He pulled out an M-60 machinegun and calmly strode out. Ripley grabbed a phaser and somersaulted out a window.

Sarah had ended up on top of Scully, their faces almost touching. "Stay down," she told the FBI agent, and rolled off towards another weapons bag. John Connor stayed down and readied his phaser. Mulder freed his service pistol and started crawling out. Scully, disregarding Sarah's advice, followed him.

The Terminator ran into two members of the assault team who, fleeing the Predators had been running towards the motel room. They bounced off him and fell down, stunned. Ignoring the humans, Terminator's sensors looked for the real danger. Behind him, Sarah Connor knocked the two agents unconscious with a couple of well-aimed shots of her phaser.

A Predator firing from the tree line by the parking lot targeted the Terminator. Cyborg and alien fired at the same time.

The Terminator's four round burst hit the Predator square in the chest. The armor-piercing bullets did their job, and the alien hunter dropped to the ground, its fluorescent green blood staining the ground.

The energy blast hit the Terminator full in the chest. The Eternity Legion force field flared in blindingly bright colors as it reflected some of the energy away. The cyborg was knocked down a step, and his leather coat and shirt were seared away, but was unharmed. The energy field collapsed under the strain, however; he was no longer protected, and his sensors told him a direct hit from the energy weapon had a 73% chance of disabling him, and 45% chance of utterly destroying him. On the other hand, the Predator would not be getting up.

A dozen yards away, Ripley saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She dodged, and a wickedly sharp spinning disk barely missed her. She tracked the movement, saw a blurred figure in the dark, and snap-fired her phaser. She was rewarded with a deafening, inhuman scream of pain.

Something large and heavy landed next to her. Ripley started to swing the phaser around, but a heavy fist knocked her hand aside. The third Predator stabbed her in the pit of the stomach, hard enough to punch through the force field and into her flesh. Ripley grunted and staggered. The Predator grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back for the finishing stroke.

Ripley kicked the Predator between its legs.

It had the same effect as it would on a human. The Predator doubled over and its descending face met Ripley's rising knee. Its face-mask crumpled under the bone-crushing impact. Ripley punched him once, twice, three times in rapid succession, each blow hard enough to deform metal or shatter stone. The Predator managed to land a blow of its own, but Ripley rode the impact, countered with a rapid combination of short punches, and put a choke-hold on the sagging alien.

"I'm so sick of aliens," she hissed, and snapped its neck.

The motel parking lot looked like a war zone. The Predators' energy blasts had ignited the gas tanks of two cars, which were burning merrily. Mulder gingerly walked out, crouched, his gun ready. He saw two semi-conscious men in assault armor; after kicking their guns away, he moved on. Somebody was crawling from under a van. Mulder walked closer.

As the man stood up, Mulder's eyes narrowed in recognition.

"Krycek!"

The assassin and Mulder aimed their guns at each other. Standoff.

"You have made some strange friends, Mulder," Krycek said.

"Those aliens were no friends of mine. They were here to kill us. Same as you."

"I guess they don't like competition," Krycek said. He sounded terribly tired.

"Put the gun down, Krycek."

"You don't know what you're doing, Mulder. We are on the edge of winning the war, and you are going to spoil it."

"I know you are selling your soul to yet another devil. Haven't you figured out you'll never get anywhere that way? Now put the gun down."

"You know I can't do that, agent Mulder."

"For the last time, drop the gun!"

> Krycek seemed to relax for a moment, and then he fired.<p>

Mulder's return shot was almost simultaneous.

For a long heartbeat, both men faced each other. Krycek smiled.

Blood started dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. He fell to his knees. Mulder walked over to stand over him.

"I know I hit you," Krycek gasped.

"A friend of mine gave me this," Mulder said, pointing to a ring on his index finger. "Better than Kevlar. You really should have dropped your gun, Krycek."

"Always wereâ€| too smartâ€| for your own good, Mulder," Krycek gasped. He collapsed.

It was funny. Revenge was supposed to make you feel good. Mulder just felt an aching emptiness.

A hand on his shoulder. Scully.

"You okay?"

"I think his shot cracked a rib. These force fields don't really make you bullet-proof."

"And everything else?"

Mulder gave a last glance at the corpse at his feet. "It's over. This part of it, at least." In a way, he had murdered Krycek, protected as he was. He wondered how he would live with that knowledge.

He was a Hunt Master. In thirty-seven worlds, he had pursued his prey, and had always brought back valuable trophies. Never had he lost an entire hunt pack. And he had thought he had been cheated when lots had been drawn and his group selected to go after this prey. Surely the egg-laying Clawed Ones and their human captors would be better sport! Instead, after an initial success ambushing a group of humans trying to kill the prey, his hunters had been killed to the last man, and he was cowering in the darkness like some pathetic animal. He quivered in rage. This dishonor must be avenged!

His shuttle ship was camouflaged not too far away. All he had to do was give a short command, and it would take to the air and lash the area with a fury of plasma bolts. All the prey would be killed. It would be dishonorable, killing prey in safety, not discriminating between those who wielded weapons and the helpless who should be spared. But it would be just as great a dishonor to flee from the enemy. He started to give the command.

A click behind him made him pause.

"Go ahead," said the emotionless voice of the artificial organism that had killed his fellow hunters. "Make my day."

The Hunt Master lunged for the control.

The .454 Magnum revolver barked once.

"Hasta la vista, baby." The Terminator wasn't sure if using the same taunt was bad form or not, but the dead Predator didn't seem to mind.

Unnamed Facility, Montana

9:47 p.m.

The phone rang, snapping Colonel Schaffer from his reverie. "Schaffer here."

"Colonel, we have a problem," said the cigarette-smoking man on the other side.

"Why don't you come tell me in person?" Schaffer said irritably. He

had seen the man come through a checkpoint less than an hour ago.

"What are you talking about? I'm on a helicopter, half an hour away from the facility."

"Butâ€¦ You have been on base for an hour!"

There was a pause. "Colonel, the base has been infiltrated. The man you've seen is an impostor, and not human. He can only be killed by a shot or puncture wound on the back of the neck. You must seal off the facility and prepare to deal with the infiltrator and with a possible attack from outside. Did you get all of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm on my way. You must hold at all costs."

Schaeffer hung up and rushed to the command center. As he entered, startling the night shift commander, alarm sirens came on, and red emergency lights started to light up everywhere.

Except Schaeffer hadn't had a chance to sound the alert.

"What's going on?"

"All the cameras in the containment units have gone dark!" his subaltern reported. "And the cages are opening!"

"Shit." There were contingency plans for this, but they weren't good. They had to flood the lower levels with nerve gas, an agent that had been found to work on the aliens. Without hesitation, Schaeffer punched the button that would do that.

Nothing happened.

"We have a saboteur on base," Schaeffer said. "The gas is not being released. I'll lead First and Second squads down there with flamethrowers, to deal with the aliens personally."

"Sir, you'd better look at this first."

It was one of the perimeter cameras. As he looked at it, Schaeffer realized that several of the outside cameras had just gone dark.

At his insistence, all cameras now provided infrared feed as well as standard visual. The standard visual display revealed nothing; the thermal display showed a large, athletic figure bound over the outer fence in a fifteen-foot somersault. The size and speed were unmistakable. A second later, a second figure followed suit.

And then the camera went dark.

Predators outside. Aliens running loose inside. Schaeffer wasn't the kind of man that panicked, but he came dangerously close for a few seconds. "Very well. First and Second squads will contain the aliens. Everyone else, you are with me." A part of Schaeffer wanted to head down below ground and face the acid-blooded aliens rather than the Predators. Another part was itching for a rematch. He had beaten one of them before, although he knew it had been a matter of luck and the

Predator's own contempt for his victims. Schaeffer didn't think highly of his chances this time.

But he had to try.

6. Chapter Six

> <meta name="ProgId"> The E-Files: Chapter Six

The E-Files: Chapter Six

Chicago County Hospital

9:46 p.m.

Gary Deckhart had become an orderly for the money. Not the pay, which was okay, but the opportunities that came with the job. A guy in his position could glean assorted expensive chemicals and then sell them on the street. Or so he had thought. Security around controlled substances was tighter than he'd expected. Until now.

They have just reopened the emergency wing of the hospital after the bombing and the investigation that followed. All kinds of wild rumors were flying about -- aliens fighting in the parking lot, a UFO cover-up, and even crazier tales -- but the important thing was that the second floor was still cordoned off. An enterprising guy might be able to find some valuable goodies in the area -- medical equipment at least, stuff that, if it went missing, would be blamed on the firefight or the investigation. So here he was, during his break, flashlight in hand, moving through the quiet rooms after stepping over the yellow police tape.

So far, he'd found nothing of value. Normally, he would have given up, but Gary was the sort of guy who would work harder at a possible scam than at a real job. It never occurred to him that he might have made more money just putting in some overtime than in wandering around off-limit areas, risking prison.

A cold draft made him pause. This was the area where somebody had punched a hole on a wall big enough to throw a horse through. Maybe he could find something interesting thereâ€|

Something large moved behind him.

Gary whirled around, waving the flashlight around. Nothing. Then he heard a strange, inhuman, inhaling-hissing sound rising from the ground behind him.

Oh, shit. Run! But his legs wouldn't move. As in a dream, he turned his head and saw what was behind him.

Gary's last thoughts of his life were consumed by a single image.

Teeth.

So many teeth.

Unnamed Facility, Montana

10:03 p.m.

The black helicopter was flying over a battle zone.

The Cigarette Smoking Man observed the carnage below. Several guard towers and vehicles were burning, as was one of the buildings. There was still some isolated fighting going on -- flashes of automatic fire, and the more intense flares of energy weapons -- but it was mostly over. The real action, he knew, would be down below, in the underground facilities. The Predators had blasted through the defenses of the facility. He was disappointed, but not really surprised.

"I've seen enough," he said. The pilot, nodding gratefully, started to circle away from the war zone.

Something flashed from the ground. The smoking man saw the ball of light soar towards them. The helicopter shuddered like a ship running aground. Smoke and sparks filled the cabin.

"We've lost power! We're going down!"

Whirling chaos for several long seconds, then a shattering impact.

Alan Schaeffer thought of the Alamo and Little Big Horn as he scrambled for cover.

The perimeter had been overrun. Most of his men were dead. Overhead, a helicopter crashed to the ground not too far from his position. Probably the smoking man; he'd been on his way here. What a mess.

In all fairness, Schaeffer was sure his precautions would have been enough against one Predator. Or even three or four. Five might have been tough.

There had been at least ten of them.

Even so, his men -- thugs that they might have been -- had fought well, at least outside. He didn't know what was going on down below, where First and Second Squads had gone.

The last fifteen minutes had been a blur of violence and death.

The perimeter had been designed to deal with Predators. The snipers had been wearing special thermal uniforms under their body armor, covering them from head to toe. They disguised their thermal signature, rendering them invisible to Predators. They had also been equipped with infrared goggles that enabled them to see past the Predator's camouflage screens. Those snipers had shot two of them -- both of them hard kills, since they were using heavy .50 caliber rifles.

Unfortunately, the gun flashes had been easy to spot. None of the snipers had survived to fire a second shot.

Schaeffer had led his men outside. They were all dressed in thermal

armor, but some had not made sure the zippers and velcro fastenings were all tight enough, and they had paid for it with their lives. And, again, whenever somebody shot, he became a target. An energy blast had barely missed Schaeffer when he scored his only kill of the night, a head-shot on a Predator who had slashed his way past a whole squad, cutting down five men in a couple of seconds. His rifle had been melted into slag, and his night-vision goggles ruined.

After that, it hadn't been much of a fight. Schaeffer had seen several Predators head into the facility, after blasting the barracks to smithereens. He thought a fourth Predator had been killed before his surviving men had broken and tried to flee.

None had survived.

Schaeffer readied his Eagle .50 caliber pistol and tried to move closer to the facility. If First and Second Squads had managed to take care of the aliens inside, maybe he could rally them. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was all he had.

Something slashed the air as it flew towards him. Schaeffer threw himself down, and the spinning blade missed his head by less than a quarter inch. Schaeffer twisted as he hit the ground, and squeezed a shot in the direction the blade had come from. The Predator roared in pain and rushed forward, wounded but not disabled. Schaeffer raised the gun. His finger tightened on the trigger. The Predator's blade sliced three inches off the gun barrel and knocked the weapon off his hand. Schaeffer felt his wrist spraining under the impact, but he ignored the pain. He rolled away, barely avoiding a back swing that would have gutted him like a fish. The kick that followed did not miss, however, and Schaeffer was catapulted several yards by the impact.

The soldier bounced off a tree, struggled to his knees. The Predator was upon him like a cat pouncing on a mouse. The alien backhanded him with casual brutality, and then pulled him to his feet. Schaeffer opened his left eye; his right was swollen shut. The Predator slowly brought its blade forward, readying the first flaying strike.

Someone shot it in the head.

The Predator's face mask leaped off the greenish mess that had been its face. The lifeless body collapsed, dragging the stunned Schaeffer down with it.

From the ground, Schaeffer saw booted feet come to a stop over him.

"Do not make any sudden moves," a cold, motionless voice commanded.

Schaeffer looked up slowly.

And saw himself, a younger version of himself, looking back at him.

Terminators were not supposed to feel shock. In fact, they were not

supposed to feel anything.

This particular one was no longer the same ordinary programmable killing machine it once had been. It had learned to care, and to feel pain.

Now, his cognitive functions experienced a 1.27-second discontinuity. His diagnostic systems reported the malfunction, but could not find a logical cause for it. Emotion had to be responsible.

The Terminator knew who the man on the ground was. His official designation had been Likeness #101. Hundreds of terminators -- the entire T-800, Model 101 line -- bore those features, modeled after a Special Forces officer with a commendable track record. One Major Schaeffer, a member of the human resistance, captured by Skynet's hordes in 2001, in the Terminator's timeline.

In some way, it was like encountering one's distant ancestor. Major Schaeffer's brain patterns and memories had been used as a model for the T-800's programming. And now, the Terminator was face to face with the man whose identity the Terminator's makers had stolen.

"Who the hell are you?" Schaeffer gasped.

John Connor, Mulder and Scully arrived at the scene.

"It's all clear," John reported before noticing who was on the ground. "Holy crap, it's your twin!"

Mulder nodded in recognition. "Colonel Schaeffer, I presume."

Schaeffer nodded back, still stunned. Scully knelt by his side. "You are injured," she said. "I'm a doctor; let me see what I can do to help you."

"I'm all right," Schaeffer replied, then belied his words with a wince as Scully probed the wounds. "Who are you people? Why is this kid here?" Schaeffer added, pointing at John Connor.

"We're here to kill the aliens," John replied.

Schaeffer thought about it for a moment.

"Good enough for me."

There'd be time for questions later, if he lived that long.

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There were no Predators outside. No living people, either. That left the underground facility.

"I can't contact the two squads that went down there," Schaeffer told the assembled Eternity agents. "But there are people trapped down there. Scientists, and prisoners. They were experimenting on humans." Schaeffer did not try to make excuses. He had not stopped it from happening, and he would carry that on his conscience until the day he died.

"There is something else," Mulder added. "I believe they were trying to find a cure for the black oil here." Krycek's comments about "winning the war" could only mean one thing, Mulder had decided. "We have to find it."

Sarah and Ripley looked at each other. "That would take care of all the alien threats to Earth in this timeline," Sarah said.

"So all we have to do is go in there." Ripley pointed towards the facilities. "With the aliens."

"I can get you down through the service tunnels," Schaeffer said. The soldier had forced himself to ignore this talk of timelines and multiple alien threats. "I doubt the elevators are working, and the Predators may be covering the main access corridors."

Ripley looked at her fellow agents, and at their newfound allies. They all looked determined to go.

A part of her had known it would be this way.

"Let's do it."

The Cigarette Smoking Man finished climbing down the ladder and rested for a moment. He had cracked several ribs during the crash landing, but he had forced himself to leave the wreckage and head into the base. The outside world must to be alerted. Not too far away, orbiting in a holding pattern, a stealth bomber awaited orders. If he could reach a working telephone, this facility would be blotted off the face of the earth. It was a pity the attempt to find a cure would end like this, but at least one could always deal with the Colonists.

He had to send out the word. This area was too remote for anybody to know what was going on. If the aliens were released into the wild, they might multiply uncontrollably. At worst, that would mean the end of humankind; at best, the Colonists would intervene, and they would know their human servants had attempted to betray them. That could not be allowed to happen.

After regaining consciousness, he had managed to reach a hidden escape hatch that led into the underground laboratory. His goal was to reach a phone; his cell phone had been smashed by the crash. So here he was, one of the most powerful me on the planet, limping through a darkened tunnel deep underground. My kingdom for a phone. He would laugh, if it didn't hurt so much.

Through the pain-induced haze, he wondered if Mulder was dead already. Krycek's team should have moved by now. It had been a hard choice to make, but this situation demanded sacrifices of Biblical proportions. The noise the Cigarette Smoking Man made at that though could have been a chuckle, or a sob, or a strangled cough. He wasn't sure himself.

A light guided him for the last stretch. There it was, a watch post. There was a saucer-sized hole on the bullet-proof glass of the booth, and a very dead guard there. He ignored the body, stumbling towards

the desk, unaware of the small form scurrying behind him. He grabbed for the phone. All he had to do was dial the right number, speak the right code word, and in ten minutes several bunker-buster 2,000-pound bombs would turn the underground complex into a good imitation of Hell.

The line was dead.

Barely repressing a loud curse, he turned around to leave the booth. He'd have to find anotherâ€|

The face-hugger's leap was so quick he never got a chance to scream.

The last soldier died screaming under a Predator's knife.

The normal thrill that accompanied a successful kill was missing, however. Things were going badly for the pack. All of the Predators above the surface were dead, and their killers were coming down.

The Hunt Leader gave a curt order. One of the Predators opened a canister, and a yellowish gas started billowing out. It contained a hormone that would accelerate the Clawed Prey's growth, spurring their already fast metabolism. Within minutes, all embryos planted in a host would "hatch." In the same amount of time, all already hatched aliens would reach their full adult size. At that point, the pack would herd the aliens towards the new enemy. If the newcomers survived fighting dozens of warriors -- and the other -- the Predators would finish them off. And if that wasn't enoughâ€|

Another order was given, one obeyed by the entire pack. Five timers started beeping their warnings, and were quickly silenced. All their self-destruct charges were now activated. If the pack did not make it back to their ship, they would take their tormentors with them.

They had divided into two teams. Ripley, Call and the Terminator were going straight down, to the holding cells. The rest of the group, led by Schaeffer, headed for the offices where the research data would be.

Sarah Connor led the way, phaser ready. She didn't particularly like the ray-gun -- most of her training had involved 20th century weapons -- but it did the job, and that was the only thing that mattered. A .45 wouldn't take down either of the two alien species they were dealing with. A part of Sarah just wanted to blow up the entire facility; coming down here, facing deadly aliens at close quarters -- it was a desperate, almost suicidal move.

And she was taking her son along.

The emergency lights gave everything a dull red shade. Sarah looked around a corner and saw the office. Somebody was there, a tall man. As she watched, he smashed a chair into a computer monitor.

"Freeze!" Sarah shouted. The man didn't freeze. He ducked behind a desk. "Damnit," Sarah hissed. She turned to her companions. "Cover me," she ordered, and rolled into the office.

The timing was exquisitely wrong.

Even as she came up from her roll. John screamed a warning down by the corridor. She heard shooting, and inhuman screeches. Something had attacked her back-ups just as she entered the office. She glanced back, and saw no trace of Scully or Mulder. A glance was all she thought she could spare. Going back to help the others meant turning her back to whomever was in the office.

As it turned out, a glance was more than she could spare.

The large man moved with uncanny speed, knocking the phaser out of her hand. Sarah tried a Judo throw, but the man shifted his weight and landed on top of her. She head-butted him. No result. The man held one of her wrists in an iron grip. With her free hand, Sarah pulled out her combat knife and drove it into the man's chest.

He smiled. Green, smoking liquid flowed from the wound.

Sarah gagged, choking on the fumes. Her eyes were burning. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe

Her attacker flung her contemptuously aside. She was fading away.

"John," she tried to call out, but all that came out was a strangled whisper.

Chicago County Hospital

10:15 p.m.

"Have you seen Deckhart?" Dr. Greene asked Dr. Carter. They had a full house tonight: two car accidents, a guy with terminal emphysema, and the usual suspects. They needed everyone on board, and Deckhart, the new orderly, always seemed to be on break.

"He's on break, I think," Carter replied with a wry smile. Deckhart was going to be on a permanent break pretty soon, he guessed, more rightly than he knew.

Mark Greene shrugged and walked over to the cubicle where the next patient lay in wait. He checked the chart. Joseph Bustamante, age 43, a smoker since age 12. Despite his emphysema, he was still a pack-a-day man. Mark shook his head. "How are we feeling, Mr. Bustamante?"

"Can't breathe so good, doc," the patient replied, breathing oxygen through a mask. Mark checked the pressure gauge. It was still better than half full. Deckhart should have been doing the checking, not him, but

Mark's nostrils flared. He turned towards the patient. "Mr. Bustamante, have you been smoking?"

The man's eyes wouldn't meet Mark's. "Uh, wellâ€¦"

"You do realize you are lying down next to highly flammable, highly explosive oxygen, don't you?"

"Sorry, doc. Here, take 'em." The man reached beneath his hospital gown and produced a pack of Malboros and a Zippo. Mark put them in his pocket. That would have been just great, an explosion less than a week after the last one.

As he left Mr. Bustamante for his next patient, Mark pondered the events of the past few days. The implications of what he had seen were almost too overwhelming, too hard to contemplate. He wondered what had happened to the two FBI agents and their mysterious associates. Had they put an end to the â€" he struggled with a word to describe the things he had seen -- infestation? By unspoken agreement, none of the ER personnel involved had discussed the situation. Carter had started to, a couple of times, but it had been too hard. They were all exposed to enough madness in their lives. Stillâ€¦

A scream cut through his musings, galvanized him into action.

He rushed out of the exam rooms. What he saw in the corridors froze him like a deer caught in the headlights of an onrushing truck.

Unnamed Facility, Montana

10:15 p.m.

The four aliens rushed them with uncanny speed. Schaeffer barely heard their initial approach, and by then it was almost too late. He whirled, interposing his body between the kid and the rushing monsters. His assault rifle â€" scavenged from a dead soldier â€" shredded the first alien with a long burst of autofire. Its acidic blood splattered the corridor, gouging holes on the floor and walls, and thankfully none of them had hit him. The two FBI agents joined in with their service pistols, and between the three of them they dropped the second one. The other two vaulted over the trashing bodies just as a Schaeffer's gun ran empty and Mulder's pistol jammedâ€¦

The kid saved their lives. He had shouldered his way past them and aimed the flashlight-like object he wielded. The wide beam had caught the two aliens and disintegrated them less than two feet away from Schaeffer. A normal gun might have killed the creatures â€" but not without raising enough acid discharges to kill the shooters as well. Schaeffer looked at the kid; he was too young to shave but his coolness under fire would have done a SEAL soldier proud. Who the hell were these people?

John Connor did not slow down. As soon as the aliens were done, he turned around in the direction his mother had gone. "Mom? Mom!" Mulder and Scully followed him, Schaeffer just a step behind.

Sarah Connor emerged from the office, looking grim and determined. John stopped, the beginning of a smile on his face. "Mom..?"

The smile disappeared as Sarah leveled her phaser at her son and his

companions. She caught them completely off-guard; all clumped in a tight knot, all with their weapons down.

Sarah Connor changed, grew larger, became a tall, grim man. Mulder and Scully recognized him. "The bounty hunter," Mulder muttered.

"How many more of you are here?" the alien bounty hunter asked.

"What have you done with my mother?" John demanded.

"Answer the question."

"Why?" Mulder replied. "You're going to kill us anyway."

"You are right," the alien replied. His finger tightened on the trigger.

He had awakened a few minutes after the attack. He had checked the time on his watch. Too soon. Much too soon. He should have been in a coma for hours, at least.

That meant his death was even sooner than he had feared.

The smoking man had rushed forward, trying desperately to reach a phone before the creature that had been planted inside him burst free. He had run into four aliens " and they had ignored him. Why not? He was serving as a host for one of them, after all.

The four aliens had charged past him, into a hail of gunfire and some energy weapon. Hidden in the shadow, the smoking man saw everything. Saw Mulder, still alive. He crept closer, uncertain of what to do next.

When the alien bounty hunter aimed the gun, the smoking man made his choice.

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It happened very fast.

The bounty hunter aimed the weapon, and Mulder briefly wondered what the energy blast would feel like.

The blast never came.

A newcomer came rushing from the shadows and grappled with the bounty hunter. The struggling figures twisted around, and Mulder recognized the newcomer. "You!" Cancer man, the nameless stranger who had been Mulder's nemesis all these years.

The smoking man's face contorted in unimaginable agony. The bounty hunter paused as he suddenly realized what exactly he was fighting with.

The alien inside the smoking man's body erupted forward, in a shower

of blood and tissue. In the same motion, the clawing cat-sized creature burrowed into the bounty hunter's chest, chewing and clawing its way in, a mindless killing machine.

The bounty hunter staggered clawing at the thing buried in his chest. The greenish caustic blood of his inhuman physiology flowed from the wound. "Stay back!" Mulder warned. "Those fumes are highly toxic!"

Highly toxic, and something else. It reacted with the other alien's acidic blood, producing a violent chemical reaction. The two extraterrestrials burst into blue flames. Before anybody could recover from the shock, the flames consumed the bounty hunter and the small alien.

Mulder rushed forward. The smoking man had fallen to his knees, and then collapsed on his back. The wound the alien had made on its way out was clearly mortal, but the smoking man was still alive. He had time for a sentence. "Bloodâ€¦|callsâ€¦|to blood, my son."

"What?" But the smoking man was no longer capable of answering.

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The had found nine uninfected people in the cells. Everybody else was dead. "Hurry!" Call had shouted, and she had led the survivors to the emergency exit, while Ripley and the Terminator covered their retreat.

Aliens had come after the group, over a dozen of them. Phasers were an ideal weapon against them, however. Wide beams had vaporized them before they reach the agents. Things were going very well.

"We are reaching the ladder," Call reported through her communicator. "It's all clear. I'm sending people out."

"We're right behind you," Ripley replied, firing her phaser one last time. The screeching alien, trying to crawl forward despite the loss of its hind legs, vanished in an acidic cloud. "All clear."

"Negative," the Terminator disagreed. "I'm detecting energy signatures down theâ€¦|"

> Something picked the Terminator up and slammed him against a wall. Shocked, Ripley realized the cyborg was stuck to wall, trapped by a wire net that was cutting deeply into his flesh. She saw a blur of movement, fired her phaser, and was rewarded by a roar of pain; a Predator, its stealth field destroyed along with much of the left side of his torso, collapsed to the ground.<p>

Unfortunately, that was the only shot she took. A razor-sharp flying disk cut off the tip of the phaser, turning the complex energy weapon into a useless collection of circuits and plastic.

The remaining four Predators turned off their stealth fields. Ripley was surrounded.

She smiled.

"Come on, let's play."

The Predators understood the challenge. The largest one, clearly the leader, nodded at one of the others. The chosen one stepped forward, wielding a machete-like weapon in each hand. These critters were downright sporting, Ripley decided.

Too bad for them. Fair fights were for suckers.

Blades flashing in a complex pattern, the Predator stepped forward. Ripley studied its moves in the instant before contact. When she moved, it was with the inhuman speed of her hybrid anatomy, combined with the best hand to hand training available in the Multiverse.

Duck under the first swing. Close in, deflecting the second blow with an elbow to the Predator's wrist. Deliver a stabbing strike to the throat, just beneath the facemask. Follow with a knee to the midsection. Grab the blades from the staggering monster. Slash, slash.

As the dead Predator toppled back, Ripley didn't pause. The first one had not been expecting her inhuman abilities; the others would not be overconfident. And she had no intention to fight three more duels. Fair fights were for suckers.

The corpse had not hit the ground when Ripley whirled and threw one of the blades at one of the Predators. The heavy sword spun into the hunter's chest and sunk most of the way in. The second Predator toppled with a surprised gurgle.

Ripley somersaulted and delivered a flying jump kick at the third Predator's head. But surprise " and her luck " had run out. The Predator's spear flicked forward, and Ripley grunted in pain as the point slammed past her force field and into her. Right through her. The Predator reversed its grip and slammed Ripley down, pinning her to the floor like a butterfly fixed in place with a pin.

The Predator stood over her. "Come on, let's play," it said, using Ripley's recorded words to mock her. The larger one moved forward, flaying knife ready.

Chicago County Hospital

10:17 p.m.

Death had come to the ER.

Dr. Mark Greene faced a coiled, leathery creature, claws and fangs and malice, surrounded by panic and chaos. At its feet lay the mangled corpse of a security guard.

Mark was human. He turned around to run.

And saw the two operating rooms, where the accident victims, still critical, were being worked on. Dr. Corday was with one of the patients, too involved in the operation to be aware of what was going on. Dr. Weaver was in the other one, also oblivious. They were helpless, too busy fending off death to see it materialized in the

corridor.

Mark Greene stopped, and turned back to face the creature.

It looked up from the bleeding corpse, and hissed.

"What do we do?" said somebody right behind him. Mark looked and saw Dr. Carter, clearly scared out of his wits, but staying by his side.

"I've got a plan," Mark replied, his mind racing.

"It better be really good," Carter said in a broken voice.

Unnamed Facility, Montana

10:18 p.m.

Her children were dead. All she had left was revenge.

Her kind had very few feelings. Hunger, a relentless drive for survival, and hatred for all other living beings. But the Queens, the child-bearers had one more emotion: care for her newborns. She had sensed everything was wrong; the children were growing unnaturally fast. She herself had matured at an alarming rate. When the cells had opened, she had decided to hide. There were tunnels beneath this one, barely large enough to accommodate her size, but her strength was also huge, and she had managed to tunnel deeper beneath the ground. She had heard the death screams of her children, as one by one they were killed. And now she was alone.

She would kill them all. Then, after she was avenged, she would breed again.

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A normal human being would have been in excruciating agony, and halfway to bleeding to death at this point. The Terminator, of course, did not have to worry about either.

Even as he tried to extricate himself from the wire net, he dispassionately observed the fight. Ellen Ripley was a formidable fighter, but given the capabilities of the extraterrestrials, he had calculated the odds of her prevailing as 33% +/- 5%. Ripley had managed to exceed his projection, killing not one but two of the Predators, but she had been "inevitably" disabled. If the cyborg did not free himself, she would be dead very soon.

The wire of the net was almost monomolecular in width. If the Terminator pushed hard enough, it might be able to cut even through his alloy endoskeleton. Getting out was a matter of finesse, not strength. Steady pushing, using the living flesh of his outer body as a cushion. The result would have horrified most uninformed observers, as blood soon covered the Terminator. But it was working. In 3.7 seconds, he would be able to slide free.

Projections are always subject to unforeseen circumstances, however. Exactly 1.3 seconds before freeing himself, the ground directly beneath the Terminator cracked and heaved. The floor and the wall

crumbled, and huge alien emerged, lashing out with claws and spearing tail. The T-800 was freed from the net, but he was trapped under the collapsing wall.

Estimated time of releaseâ€|

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The first claw strike cut the smaller Predator in half. The Hunt Leader did not fare any better. The alien's stinger drove clean through his torso and lifted him off the floor. The Hunt Leader did not go quietly, however. As he was thrust into the alien Queen's jaws, he fired his shoulder guns. As the energy blasts gouged huge chunks of the alien's body, the Predator drove his knife into the Queen's eye. The guns continued firing even after the Queen bit off his head.

It was mutual destruction, brutal and cruel â€" and brave, for courage is not found only in the virtuous.

The Queen spat the Predator's head, and then sank to the ground, dying. She was avenged..

Ripley lifted the largest piece of wall off the Terminator. "You're a mess," she said, looking down at the barely recognizable body. Most of the flesh had been torn off the Terminator's body, leaving behind a bloodied, grinning skeleton. Ripley barely repressed her disgust: she hated those reminders of the inhumanity of artificial life. Her friendship with Call had helped a bit, but she rarely got to see Call's insides, either.

"I am still functional," the Terminator said, getting up. "All hostiles have been terminated." He scanned the area. "Oh, shit," he added in a toneless voice. He was trying to talk more like a human, but he still was terrible at the delivery.

"Oh, shit?" asked Ripley.

"We have five self-destruct devices activated. The resulting detonation will utterly destroy this facility."

"Oh, SHIT!" Ripley's delivery was a lot more convincing.

"Okay, I've downloaded all the files," John Connor reported. He gave his mother yet another worried glance. Scully had bandaged her eyes, using Mulder's shirt for material. She was still semiconscious, but she had suffered no permanent harm. "The vaccine against the black oil, the whole works."

"Good," Schaeffer said. "I think it's time weâ€|"

"Hold one," John interrupted. "I'm getting a call on my communicator. Say again, Ripley?"

"Get out now!" Ripley shouted. "This place is going to blow up!"

Chicago County Hospital

10:18 p.m.

The alien pounced on a new victim, a relative of a patient who had panicked and tried to run past it. His screams were suddenly cut off when the alien tore out his throat.

"Go!" Mark Greene shouted.

Carter threw the oxygen canister at the alien; it hit its midsection.

Mark lit the Zippo lighter he had taken from Mr. Bustamante, and tossed it toward the open canister. He ducked for cover.

The explosion wasn't huge, but it was strong enough to shatter glass and knock people down. The alien roared, surrounded by flames. Carter sprung back, and threw bottles of alcohol and other flammables at the creature. Totally engulfed, the alien ran away, crashing through the outer doors. Mark and Carter ran after it.

An ambulance was just pulling in as the alien ran out. The vehicle hit the creature, and knocked it several yards away. The fire and the impact did the thing. The alien collapsed, its acidic blood melting a large hole in the asphalt and concrete of the lot.

The two doctors looked at each other. "Well, that's something you don't see every day," Carter said. Greene only nodded.

One of the paramedics in the ambulance hailed them. "Guy, I don't know what the hell that was, but we've got a hurt boy in here."

"Let's go, Carter," Dr. Greene said. "No rest for the weary."

Unnamed Facility, Montana

10:19 p.m.

The explosions devoured the entire facility, carving a crater on the ground and raising a flaming mushroom cloud that was seen for miles around.

Military units arrived at the scene shortly afterwards. They found no trace of survivors.

7. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="ProgId"> The E-Files: Chapter Six

The E-Files: Epilogue

Mulder's apartment, Washington DC

10:03 p.m.

The knock on the door was not unexpected, but Mulder answered it with some trepidation. He glanced at Scully for support before he opened the door. Her serene smile comforted him.

"Come in." Sarah Connor and Ripley accepted the invitation. "I'm glad you are okay, Ms. Ripley," Mulder added. Neither Ripley nor Arnold had quite made it out of the facility before it exploded. Very little had been left of either of them, but they had survived.

"We are very hard to kill, agent Mulder," Ripley replied. "Some more than others, of course." Sarah Connor was also completely recovered from the close encounter with the bounty hunter.

The Eternity Agents sat down and faced the FBI agents. "Well, we're here for the wrap-up," Sarah said. "And your answer."

Mulder nodded. "Well, we gave the vaccine formula to a few contacts of ours." He turned to Scully.

"The vaccine is not particularly hard to produce. And several members of the original conspiracy have switched allegiance. With their resources, we will have total exposure to the vaccine in two years, with over 75% in the first two months."

"The colonization project is dead." Mulder continued. "We won." He didn't add that it had been a costly victory. With the collapse of the Conspiracy, Mulder had learned many of the truths he had been seeking all of these years. Truths about his family — his sister, his father. Some of those truths had been very hard to take.

"We have also completed another turn in Chicago," Scully said. "We are certain that there was only one alien in the area, and that it was killed thanks to the actions of the hospital's personnel."

Sarah shook her head. "I can't believe we missed it. And that those doctors were able to take it out."

"Believe it," Ripley said. "Sometimes, it doesn't take special powers or weapons. Sometimes, it takes guts, and a little luck."

"Heroes come in many guises," Mulder agreed.

"They are ER doctors," Scully said. "They were already heroes."

"In any case, there is too much information available for a cover-up. The truth is going to come out, at least some of it. Enough of it — humanity is going to find out it is not alone in the universe."

> "Many people will refuse to believe even with all the evidence," Scully replied. "Still, who knows what the consequences will be?"<p>

"Well, we know a bit about that," Sarah said. "According to our superiors, there will be some chaos and instability, but soon things will settle down. There will also be a renewed interest in space exploration. More unity, too; when people realize there are beings outside humankind, and that some of them are not friendly, they find it hard to hate and fear each other."

"And the X-Files?"

"People will be more willing to face the unexplained. Even in law enforcement. It will be a lot harder to hide behind incredulity and disbelief."

"So I guess our job here is done," Mulder concluded.

"Possibly. Which brings me to the question we asked you before."

Mulder leaned back on his chair. He had seen very little, in the few minutes they had been at Mother's â€" a huge fortress somewhere near the end of time, if their guides could be believed. They had been transported there after the explosion, to avoid the authorities. So little, and yet so much. He and Scully had spoken for a long time, a discussion that had carried into the wee hours of the night. At the end, there had been no need for words, and they had been together in a different way. He didn't know what would come of that, but he knew of the other result of that night.

"This morning, we tendered our resignation, effective immediately."

"In other words, we accept," Scully added.

"I'm glad to hear it," Sarah said, accepting the proffered handshakes. "It's a dangerous job, a nasty job, but a necessary job."

"That's one hell of a recruiting motto," Mulder said with a smile. "But we're still in."

Chicago, IL

11:43 p.m.

Mark Greene slept, and dreamed. Things had finally settled down, and he was back to work normally. It had been a chaotic few weeks, with all kinds of strange news and revelations, but he felt, more than anything elseâ€| exhilarated. He had faced Death's avatar, and he had beaten it. And if that was not a physician's ultimate duty, what was?

So he slept, and dreamt of a time when death and suffering were vanquished once for all, unaware that one day in the unimaginable future, those dreams would come true, and he would be there to see it.

THE END

End
file.